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86

[EIGHTY-
SIX]

**ASATO
ASATO**

ILLUSTRATION:
Shirabii

MECHANICAL DESIGN:
I-IV

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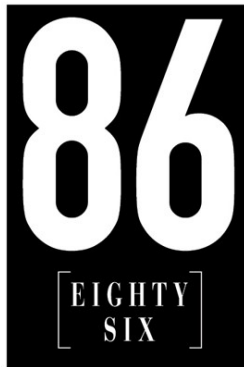
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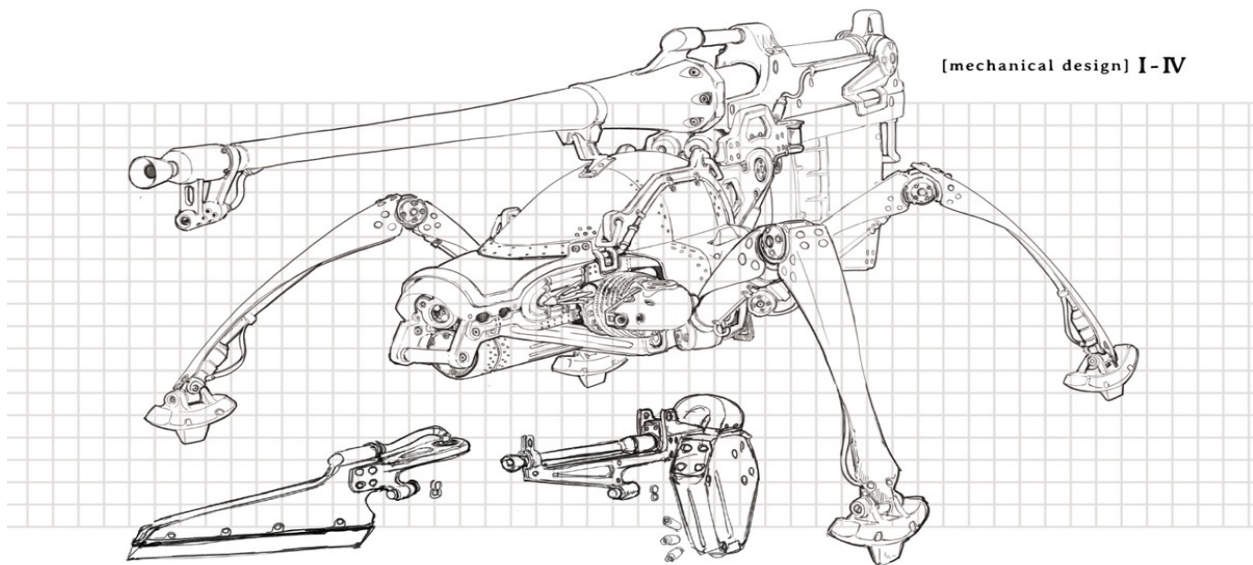
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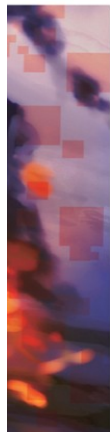
MECHANICAL DESIGN:
I-IV


NEW YORK





[mechanical design] I-IV



The Republic of San Magnolia's Drone: M1A4 Juggernaut

[S P E C S]

Manufacturer: Republic Military Industries (RMI)

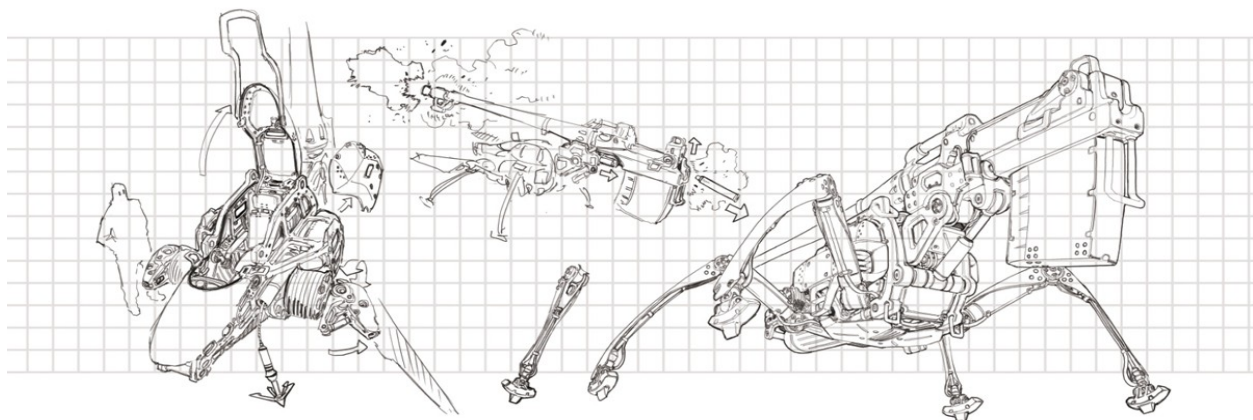
Total Length: 10.7 m / Height: 2.1 m
[not including mount arms]

Armaments: Grappling Sub Arms + High-Frequency
Blade [x2] or Grappling Sub Arms, 12.7 mm Machine
Gun [x2], Wire Anchor [x2]

Gun Mount Arm installed on the fuselage's rear
[usually equipped with a 57 mm slide gun]

Note: As it is a drone, it is minimally armored and not
equipped with any sort of life-preserving equipment,
such as airbags.

The M1A4 Juggernaut that appears
in this work is the name of the drone
employed by the Republic. However...
drone is an ostensible designation. Having
failed to develop a functional combat AI,
the Republic—spurred by the threat of
the Legion—adopted the most deplorable
approach imaginable. That is, “If the one
who pilots it is not considered human,
then it can be considered an ‘unmanned
drone.’” As such, the subhumans of the
Republic—the Eighty-Six—pilot these
machines on the battlefield, their fates
one and the same.



86

— EIGHTY-
SIX —



[Lena]

Full name: Vladilena Milizé. An elite Republic officer who has achieved the rank of major at the tender age of sixteen. Commands Shin and the rest of the Spearhead squadron from afar in the Republic Headquarters using the Sensory Resonance technology Para-RAID.

[Shin]

Full name: Shinei Nouzen. A boy from the Eighty-Sixth Sector, of those known as the Eighty-Six. A veteran serving in the Spearhead squadron. A highly skilled pilot who has survived many harrowing battles.
Personal Name: Undertaker.

STORY BY ASATO ASATO

ILLUSTRATION BY SHIRABII

MECHANICAL DESIGN BY I-IV

C H A R A C T E R S

The two fight, each on their own battlefield.
She fights against her tears. He fights against his death.
They fight on, never seeing each other's faces...

SPEARHEAD



[Theo]

A guileless boy who also shows a brutal honesty befitting his age. Personal Name: Laughing Fox.

[Kaie]

A good-humored girl with no filter. Personal Name: Kirschblüte.

[Raiden]

The Spearhead squadron's vice captain. Shin's right-hand man, who is always supporting him. Personal Name: Wehrwolf.

[Daiya]

A tall young man with a tendency to get the short end of the stick in every situation. Personal Name: Black Dog.

[Anju]

A girl who appears graceful at first glance but is as ruthless on the field of battle as any of her male companions. Personal Name: Snow Witch.

[Haruto]

A cheerful boy who serves as the squadron's mood maker. Personal Name: Falke.

[Kurena]

A girl who specializes in sniping. Harbors feelings for Shin. Personal Name: Gumbinger.

[The Eighty-Six]

Those exiled to the nonexistent no-man's-land outside the Republic's eighty-five Sectors. They are sent to concentration camps, and the healthy among them are forced into conscription. They march to their tragic deaths in battle against the Empire's drones, the Legion. The Spearhead squadron, led by Shin, is a group of seasoned veterans who have survived countless battles. Their experiences earned them their own Personal Names—they are the Name Bearers, who have adopted awe-inspiring titles.

Copyright

86—EIGHTY-SIX

Vol. 1

ASATO ASATO

Translation by Roman Lempert

Cover art by Shirabii

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86—Eighty Six— vol. 1

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No country would ever consider it an act of evil to deny a pig human rights. Therefore, if you were to define someone speaking a different tongue, someone of a different color, someone of a different heritage as a pig in human form, any oppression, persecution, or atrocity you might inflict upon them would never be regarded as cruel or inhumane.

—VLADILENA MILIZÉ, *MEMOIRS*

COQUELICOTS BLOOMING ACROSS THE BATTLEFIELD

<System Start>

<RMI M1A4 Juggernaut OS Version 8.15>

A rumbling cacophony mixed into the noise of the radio transmission.

"Handler One to Undertaker. Enemy interception force is visible on radar. We've confirmed a battalion-size unit of Anti-Tank Artillery types as well as a force of Dragoon types of similar size."

"Acknowledged, Undertaker. I can sense them from here."

"Command is transferred to the commanding officer on the field, effective immediately. Show gratitude to your homeland with your flesh and blood and defend the Republic with your very life."

"Roger."

"...I'm sorry, you guys. I'm so sorry."

<End transmission>

<Cockpit sealed>

<Power pack activated. Actuator engaged. Joint-lock mechanism released.>

<Stabilizer: operating normally. FCS: compatible. Vetronics: off-line. Enemy scouting mode: passive.>

"Undertaker to all units. Handler One has relinquished command. Henceforth, Undertaker will take command of the operation."

"Acknowledged, Alpha Leader. Same as always, right, Reaper? What did our cowardly wuss of an owner say in the end there?"

"That they're sorry."

The voice at the other end of the Para-RAID burst into laughter.

"Ha, those white pigs never change. They drive us out, lock us up, and then plug their ears and say they're sorry? The hell... All units, you heard him. If we gotta march to our deaths anyway, at the very least, it might not be so bad with our trusty Reaper there to guide us."

"Sixty seconds till contact with the enemy... The bombardment's coming. Break through the enemy's bombardment zone at maximum combat speed."

"Let's do this, boys!"

<Open Combat Maneuvers>

<Enemy Unit Detection set to Bogey 1> <Set to Bogey 2> <Bogey 3> <Bogey 4> <Bogey 5>

<Bogey 6> <Bogey 7> <Bogey 8> <Bogey 9> <Bogey 10> <Bogey 11> <Bogey 12> <Bogey

13> <Bogey 14> <Bogey 15> <Bogey 16> <Bogey 17> <Bogey 18> <Bogey 19> <Bogey 20>

<Bogey 21> <Bogey 22> <Bogey 23> <Bogey 24> — ...

<Engage: Bogey 210>

"Delta Leader to Delta squadron! Don't try running around—we're taking them out here!"

"Charlie Three! Hostile on your ten! Dodge it— Shit!"

"Echo One to all units. Echo Leader KIA. Echo One taking over command."

"Bravo Two to all units. Sorry... Looks like this is the end of the line."

"Alpha Leader to Alpha Three! Hold on just a minute longer! I'm on my way! Alpha One, take over command for me."

"Roger that. Good luck out there, Alpha Leader."

"Thanks... Hey, Shin. Undertaker."

"What?"

"You still remember your promise, right?"

"...Yeah."

<C1 Signal Lost>

<Friendly Units: 0>

The officer's voice, mingled with static, issued from his removed headset and disturbed the dusk breeze.

"To...units... Handler One to all units. Do you read? Respond, first unit."

He leaned against his unit's fuselage—an organic-looking thing, similar to a chrysalis—and reached into the cockpit's opened canopy and pressed the radio's transmission button.

"Undertaker to Handler One. Enemy interception force exterminated. We've confirmed the enemy forces' retreat. Operation complete. Returning to base."

"...Undertaker. H-how many will be returning—?"

<End transmission>

It was a foolish question with nothing to be gained from an answer. Before the other person could finish speaking, he cut the transmission and returned his gaze to outside the cockpit.

The scene was illuminated by the sunset with a coquelicot glow, casting shadows on a battlefield littered with flickering flames and the remains of crouching metal beasts and quadruped spiders, mechanical viscera protruding from their frames. Those were the remains of friend, the remains of foe, the remains of everything.

Not a single trace of life remained on this battlefield except for him. Look as far as he might, all he would find would be corpses and the ghosts of those who lingered even after death. The silence was unsettling. Across the fields, the sun set into a shadowy mountain range, casting red, level rays of light his way.

In this dying world bathed in crimson, or perhaps dyed over by shadow, he and his unit were the one thing that could still move. The unit's long limbs were designed after an insect's arthropod legs. Its discolored armor was decorated with countless scars, and it was equipped with a scissorlike high-frequency blade and a back-mounted main armament.

Its silhouette was that of a prowling spider, but its quadruped nature and the cannon on its back likened it to a scorpion. Lacking anything that could be considered a head, its form was reminiscent of a beheaded skeletal corpse, crawling along the battlefield, searching for its missing crown.

Sighing a single breath into the air, he reclined against the armored fuselage as it cooled against the dusk wind, turning his gaze up to the terrifying brilliance of the sunset sky.

A distant eastern country once told of a flower born from the blood of the mistress of a great king, who ended her own life. Or perhaps that flower bloomed from rivers of blood spilled from knights butchered by barbarians.

The crimson of those coquelicots that blossomed as far as the eye could see, illuminated by the sunset that burned all to nothing, was as beautiful as sheer madness.

Life, land, and legacy.
All reduced to a number.

86

[EIGHTY-
SIX]

Countless souls were claimed.
But no deaths were recorded.

1

ASATO ASATO

ILLUSTRATION: Shirabii

MECHANICAL DESIGN: I-IV

CHAPTER 1
A BATTLEFIELD WITH ZERO
CASUALTIES

There were no casualties on that battlefield.

“—And now, we have an update regarding the war.

“A group of the unmanned Imperial weapons known as the Legion have invaded the seventeenth ward today. The force was intercepted, severely crippled, and forced to retreat by the might of our unmanned drones, the Juggernauts, pride and joy of the Republic of San Magnolia. Damage to equipment was light, and no loss of life was reported on our side today yet again.”

The main street of the Republic of San Magnolia’s capital, Liberté et Égalité, was so peaceful and beautiful one would be hard pressed to believe the country had been at war for the past nine years.

Carved white marble graced the facades of the city’s high-rise buildings. The greenery of the roadside trees and the black cast-iron lampposts mingled to create a picturesque contrast with the spring sunlight and the clear blue sky. The cafés on the street corners were populated by students and couples, their naturally silver hair glittering as they laughed loudly.

The city hall’s blue roof was adorned with a flag bearing the visage of the saint of the revolution, Saint Magnolia, and the Republic’s five-colored national flag. Its five colors stood for freedom, equality, brotherhood, justice, and nobility. The main street was paved with vast, delicately carved stones, the result of meticulous urban planning.

A young boy passed by Lena, his silver hair shining like the moon as he laughed, holding his parents’ hands. Dressed so neatly, they were probably going out somewhere. Sparing a final glance at the backs of the happy family, she turned her silver eyes to the street-side television’s holo-screen, the smile fading from her lips.

She was clad in the Republic military’s dark-blue collared uniform for female officers. The sixteen-year-old girl had a snow-white beauty and a certain glasswork delicacy that fit her age—and an elegant demeanor that reflected her upbringing and pedigree. Her softly flowing, silken hair and long eyelashes were a striking silver, and her large, equally silver eyes served as proof of her being not only an Alba, a descendant of the race native to this land since ages past, but also a pureblood Celena, who were considered to be of noble birth.

“Under the capable command of our skilled Handlers, these highly efficient drones allow us to defend the nation while eliminating the need to dispatch precious lives to the front lines. There can be no doubting the usefulness of the Republic’s humane and advanced combat system. The day when the Republic’s righteous ways defeat the fallen Empire’s evil relics will surely come even before the entire Legion shuts down in two years’ time. Hail the Republic of Magnolia. Glory to the five-hued flag.”

Lena’s expression darkened at the sight of the snowy-haired, silver-eyed alabaster newscaster’s brilliant smile. This optimistic, or rather unrealistic, news report had been repeated countless times since the war began, and the majority of civilians didn’t doubt its authenticity. They believed it in spite of the fact that after being driven out of more than half its territory less than a month into the war, the Republic had failed to regain any of it in nine years of fighting.

And all it took was one cursory look around this picturesque main street to notice a certain fact. It was evident in the newscaster, the couples and students in the café, the people passing by, and of course, even Lena herself. The Republic prided itself on being the first modern democracy in the world and proactively welcomed immigrants from other countries. The Republic had been the native land of the Alba since ages past, while other countries were home to people of different colors. All people of color, Colorata, were welcomed equally, be they the dark-as-night Aquila; the golden Aurata, who shone like the sun; the Rubela with their brilliant crimson hair; or the blue-eyed Caerulea.

But right now, if one was to scour the capital’s main street—no, even the city in its entirety—all one would find in the Republic’s eighty-five administrative Sectors would be silver-haired, silver-eyed Alba.

Yes, formally speaking, there were no soldiers considered human or counted among the dead on the battlefield. However...

“...That’s not to say no one died.”

One corner of Palace Blancneige, once home to the royal court in days past, now served as the military’s luxurious headquarters. This palace, and the fortification wall that encircled the administrative Sector, the Gran Mule, was Lena’s destination and the center of command for the entirety of the Republic’s military.

There were no soldiers outside the Gran Mule, on the front lines one hundred kilometers away from the fortress walls. Only drones—Juggernauts—fought on the battlefield, and they were commanded from control rooms in the military’s headquarters. Their line of defense, which consisted of over one hundred thousand Juggernauts, with antipersonnel, anti-tank minefields at their back and a surface-to-surface interception artillery cannon, had never been breached. And of course, the forces stationed at the Gran Mule had never seen live combat. Other professions in the military included communications, transport, analysis, tactical planning, and assorted

bureaucracy. In other words, not a single soldier in the Republic military had ever known true combat.

Lena frowned, catching the conspicuous stench of alcohol coming from a group of officers that passed her by. They had probably used the control room's large screen to watch sports or something again. As she aimed a reproachful look at them, her gaze was met with sneering eyes.

"Gentlemen, it looks like our little doll-loving princess has something to say."

"Whoa, scary, scary. She's better off shutting herself in her room and playing with her precious drones."

She wheeled around to look at them, unable to contain her irritation.

"Listen, you—"

"Morning, Lena."

A voice called out to her from her side, and she turned to find Annette, who had joined the army the same year she had, greeting her. She was a technical lieutenant affiliated with the lab division and a friend of Lena's since secondary school. As they had both skipped a grade, she was currently Lena's only friend who was the same age.

"...Good morning, Annette. You're certainly here early. Don't you usually oversleep?"

"I'm on my way back from work. Pulled an all-nighter yesterday... Please don't lump me together with those idiots, okay? You know I'm a workaholic. An issue that could only be resolved by certified genius Technical Lieutenant Henrietta Penrose popped up."

Annette gave a long, catlike yawn. Her short hair was an Alba's silver, and her large, hanging eyes were a similar silvery hue. Annette shrugged, sparing a glance in the direction of the group of drunkards that had retreated during the pair's exchange, as if to say that trying to discipline idiots like them was a waste of time. Lena blushed, realizing from the look in her friend's elegant eyes that she was trying to stop her from doing just that.

"Oh, right. The alert on your information terminal was on. You should probably take care of that."

"Oh no... Sorry. Thanks, Annette."

"Don't mention it. Just try to not get too caught up with the drones, okay?"

Lena turned on her heel, a frown on her face, and after shaking her head once, made her way to her designated command room.

The command room was small, half filled by an artificial, mechanical command console, and was an otherwise dark, chilly, and cold space. The silvery walls and floor were dimly lit by the console's standby-mode hologram.

Taking a seat on the armchair, Lena shifted her argent locks aside and placed a resplendent metal ring—the RAID Device—around her neck with a cold, dignified gaze. Now that the battlefronts were far beyond the walls of

the Gran Mule, this cramped room was the sole battlefield one could find in the Republic's eighty-five Sectors.

"Commence authentication. Major Vladilena Milizé, commanding control officer for the eastern front's ninth ward, third defensive squadron."

Having completed its retinal and voice authentication, the control system turned on. Holographic screens flickered on one after another, displaying a dizzying amount of information from countless pieces of observation equipment set across the distant battlefield. The main screen was a digital map that displayed the Republic's and the enemy's mobile weapons as blips. The friendly units—in other words, the Juggernauts—were displayed as blue blips, numbering seventy. The third squadron, which was under Lena's command, had twenty-four units, while the second and fourth squadron had twenty-three each. The red blips that symbolized the enemy units, the Legion, were far too many to count.

"Activate Para-RAID. Set Resonance target, information-processing unit Pleiades."

The blue-crystal portion of the RAID Device, which was set against the nape of Lena's neck, suddenly prickled with heat. It wasn't actual, physical heat but an illusory heat felt by her nerve cells as they were stimulated by the Sensory Resonance. The activated pseudo-nerve-cell crystal served as an information-processing unit and stimulated a certain part of the brain. Perhaps that part held potential to be unlocked by humanity's evolution, or perhaps it was an unused section, left behind and forgotten by humankind as it evolved ages ago. Whatever the case, using it unlocked a deep, night-vestigial function of the brain known as the Night Head.

Lena passed through a "path," diving into a place far deeper than her consciousness and even her subconscious. The "collective unconscious" of humankind, shared by every member of the human race. Lena linked her consciousness with the third squadron's captain, the Processor operating Personal Name unit Pleiades via the sea of the unconscious. Pleiades's and Lena's sensory information was linked and shared.



“Handler One to Pleiades—Resonance complete. I look forward to working with you today,” she said gently, and the “voice” of a young man, presumably a year or two older than she was, replied.

“Pleiades to Handler One. Resonance is loud and clear.”

The voice was laced with irony. Lena was all alone in the command room, so it wasn’t the someone else with her. It was the voice of Pleiades’s Processor, being transmitted to her through their now-shared sense of hearing.

A voice.

Having been built in a hurry during wartime, Juggernauts weren’t constructed to be able to communicate orally, and they weren’t programmed to have advanced cognitive abilities that would allow them to think or feel. The Para-RAID—Sensory Resonance—linked consciousness via the human collective unconscious; the defense lines’ minefield, despite the enemy using armored units, was set with antipersonnel mines.

The secret behind the front lines where drones fought one another, the battlefield with zero casualties.

“Your polite greetings to us subhuman Eighty-Six are much appreciated, Alba.”

Eighty-Six. As the continent was being swept over by the Legion, the last remaining paradise for the Republic’s citizens was the eighty-five Sectors. The Eighty-Sixth Sector was designated a no-man’s-land, populated by pigs in human form. Despite being born civilians of the Republic, they were decreed to be subhuman, inferior life-forms by the Republic. It was a derogatory name for those Colorata cast outside the Gran Mule to live in internment camps on the front lines.

†

Nine years earlier, year 358 of the Republic calendar, year 2136 of the global calendar.

The Republic’s eastern neighbor and superpower of the northern continent, the Empire of Giad, declared war on all its neighboring countries and began attacking with an army of the world’s first completely autonomous unmanned combat drone, Legion.

Faced with the Empire’s overwhelming military strength, the Republic Armed Forces were decimated within half a month. As what was left of the army gathered its remaining forces to stall the invasion via hopeless delay tactics, the Republic’s government made two decisions.

The first was the evacuation of all the Republic’s citizens to the eighty-fifth administrative Sector. The second was Presidential Order #6609. The Special Wartime Peace Preservation Act. This law acknowledged all persons of Colorata descent within the borders of the Republic as inimical characters and supporters of the Empire and allowed the stripping of their

civilian rights. They were designated as targets of monitoring and isolated in internment camps outside the eighty-five Sectors.

This act was, of course, in violation of the Republic's constitution and the spirit of the five-hued flag. The law also did not include Alba, who formerly lived in the Empire. Neither did it spare Colorata who were not originally from the Empire. It was a policy of blatant racism and discrimination.

The Colorata were opposed to the law, of course, but their opposition was silenced by violence at the hands of the government. Some Alba, however few, also cried out against the law, but the majority accepted it. The eighty-five Sectors were far too small to accommodate the sheer number of civilians, and there was nowhere near enough food, land, or labor for everyone. False rumors were spread that the Republic's defeat in the war came as a result of the Colorata's spying. Those rumors were far easier for the civilians to accept than coming to terms with their country's technological inferiority.

But more than anything, in a situation where they were surrounded and isolated by enemies, they needed something, *someone*, to take their frustrations out on. This justification by way of eugenics spread quickly among the populace. The Alba, who founded the country that stood as the foremost advocate of democracy—the greatest, most humane of all forms of government—were the superior race. By contrast, the Colorata, with their outdated, cruel, and inhumane imperialism, were an inferior species—barbaric and foolish subhumans, pigs in human form and the result of an evolutionary blunder.

Thus, all Colorata in the Republic were banished to internment camps where they were forced into labor and conscripted for the sake of constructing the Gran Mule. Their properties and belongings were requisitioned by the government to fund the construction of the wall and the war effort, and the Alba civilians who were spared from conscription, labor, and wartime taxes all praised the government's humane methodology.

The Alba mocked the Colorata as a lesser species, calling them the Eighty-Six. This discriminatory approach ultimately manifested two years later with the introduction of drones manned by living soldiers—and all those soldiers were of the Eighty-Six. Despite pouring all their efforts into producing a Republic-made unmanned drone, no attempt ever achieved the level where it could withstand live combat. But there was no way the superior Alba could admit to failing to produce such a machine when the inferior Empire could.

Since the Eighty-Six were not considered human, having one pilot the machine would categorize it not as a mounted craft but as an unmanned drone.

The Republic Militarized Autonomous Drone known as the Juggernaut, manufactured by Republic Military Industries (RMI), was lauded by the civilians upon its release as an innovative, cutting-edge, and humane

weapon system that minimized human casualties to zero. The Eighty-Six who served as pilots were designated information-processing units—Processors—making the Juggernaut an Operated Drone.

The year 367 of the Republic calendar. Yet another day dawned when soldiers, who were treated as nothing more than mechanical parts, set out to suffer deaths that would not be counted as deaths, on a battlefield without casualties.



Confirming that the Legion's red blips were retreating east—into the depths of their territory—Lena finally felt the tension begin to leave her body. In exchange for this retreat, her third squadron lost seven units. A bitter taste filled her mouth. Seven Juggernauts detonated, exploding along with the Processors who piloted them. None survived.

Juggernaut—the name the so-called intellectual developers gave to this machine, drawing on the name of a god from a foreign land's mythos. Countless people would gather before this tank in search of salvation and would be run over by its wheels and crushed to death in its wake.

"...Handler One to Pleiades. We've confirmed the enemy forces' retreat."

She communicated this to Pleiades's Processor—the Eighty-Six pilot who agreed to serve on the field of battle for five years in exchange for the restoration of his family's civil rights—via Para-RAID.

Sensory Resonance allowed them to hear each other's voices as well as the sounds of their surroundings. It was truly a groundbreaking means of communication that rendered radio transmissions (which were susceptible to interference by distance, weather conditions, and terrain—not to mention the electromagnetic jamming of the Eintagsfliege clouds) completely obsolete.

Theoretically, all five senses could be linked via Para-RAID, but typically, users chose to link only their sense of hearing. The amount of data shared by linking eyesight via Para-RAID was often overwhelming and could result in sensory overload, risking serious damage to the user. Hearing, on the other hand, gave one a solid grasp of the situation on the other side with minimal data. In terms of actual experience, it wasn't much different from communication via radio or telephone, but there were comparatively fewer disturbances.

Lena believed those weren't the only reasons. Refusing to link eyesight spared the Handler from having to see many things: the awe-inspiring sight of the enemy charging toward you, the sight of one's comrades being ruthlessly blown to bits in every direction, the color of viscera and blood spilling from one's own eviscerated body.

"The fourth squadron will take over lookout duties. Third squadron, please return to base."

“Acknowledged, Pleiades... Hope you enjoyed watching us pigs squabble through your little telescope, Handler One.”

The scathing irony that never left his voice from start to finish made Lena look at the floor. She knew they couldn't help but hate her. She was an Alba—and one of their oppressors. And just like he said, keeping watch over them was part of her role as Handler.

“Good job today, Pleiades. And to all other units, too, and the seven who were lost... I'm so, so sorry.”

“...”

A certain coldness, like that of a sword being drawn from its scabbard, mixed into the silence on the other side of the Resonance. The Para-RAID linked only their hearing, but since the Resonance was conducted via their consciousness, feelings that would normally come across only in face-to-face conversations were also transmitted.

“...Thank you for all the kind words you always offer us, Handler One.”

Cold contempt and hatred were sprinkled into those words. But there was something to the coldness that went beyond the kind of obvious hatred and indignation one would feel toward their oppressor. Something that left Lena confused and bewildered.

†

The following morning's news once again spoke of how vast the enemy's losses were, how light the damage to the Republic's side was, and how there were—as always—no casualties. The announcer once again praised the Republic's cutting edge and humane tactics, how the enemy's defeat must be close at hand, and so on and so forth. Lena sometimes wondered whether the news was actually a recording being broadcast over and over. This was a government-sponsored broadcast, with an emblem of a sword and shattered chains in the background. These stood for the overthrowing of sovereign rule and the fall of oppression and were the symbol of Saint Magnolia, patron saint of the revolution.

“...In preparation for the cessation of hostilities in two years' time, the government has decided to gradually reduce the military budget. As a precursor to that, the seventeenth ward of the southern front will be abolished, and all forces stationed there dissolved and discharged—”

Lena sighed. They probably surrendered the seventeenth ward. This certainly wasn't the kind of news they could afford to simply gloss over. Not only had they lost territory, they were giving up on trying to reclaim it and choosing to disarm themselves on top of that. The government had used up all the Eighty-Six properties a long time ago, and now the voices of the civilians demanding they reduce the vast war budget and disarm in favor of welfare and public works were becoming gradually harder to ignore.

Sitting across from her, dressed in an antiquated gown, Lena's mother opened her perfectly rouged lips to speak.

“...What’s the matter, Lena? Put away your troubles and have something to eat.”

The dining room table was set with breakfast, but the majority of it was factory-made synthetic food. Having lost half its land, the Republic was running out of space as its population increased by 80 percent—with the exception of the Eighty-Six. And the eighty-five Sectors didn’t have the farmland required to support the population. They were also cut off from other foreign countries by the Legion’s Eintagsfliege jamming, which meant that trading, diplomatic relationships, or even confirming whether any such countries *still existed* was impossible.

Lena took a sip of tea that was different from the tea she hazily remembered from the past and cut a piece of synthetic meat, made from wheat proteins and created to replicate natural meat’s appearance and flavor. The only natural thing about her meal was the compote she added to her tea, made from raspberries they grew in the garden. But even this was a commodity not seen in the Republic’s average household, which didn’t even have room for a flowerpot, much less a garden, making it fairly valuable.

Her mother smiled.

“Lena, isn’t it about time you quit the army and find a groom from a good family?”

Lena sighed internally. This conversation was repeated word for word every day, same as the news broadcast. Pedigree. Status. Standing. Lineage. Superior bloodline. This silk dress, which became antiquated and obsolete the moment you stepped outside. This mansion, built in the days when the Milizé household was still considered nobility. Preserved relics of a blessed era long gone, standing frozen in time, enveloping themselves in sweet dreams and refusing to look outside.

“The Legion and the Eighty-Six are hardly matters the daughter of the great Milizé household should concern herself with. I know your late father was a soldier, but the war is behind us now.”

How could the war be behind them if they were in the middle of fighting the Legion even now? The battlefield was just far and out of sight, and those who went to war never returned to speak of it. As far as the civilians were concerned, the war was nothing more than a collection of fictional events in a movie, with no sense of reality or involvement on their part.

“Protecting the motherland is a Republic citizen’s duty and pride, Mother. And please don’t call them Eighty-Six. They’re respectable citizens of the Republic, same as you and me.”

A wrinkle ran across her mother’s thin, refined nose.

“How can you consider them members of the Republic when they’re stained with those filthy colors? Honestly, even if you must feed livestock to have it do your bidding, what is the government thinking, letting those animals set foot on Republic soil?”

The Eighty-Six who agreed to engage in combat were granted the restoration of civil rights for themselves and their families. To protect them

from the severe persecution and discrimination of the eighty-five Sectors, their whereabouts were kept confidential, but it'd been nine years since the beginning of the war. Surely some of them had returned to live in their old homes by now.

This was the just reward they received for their dedication to the state. Sadly, those in power could not see the justification for such a reward and merely shook their heads at the deplorable state of affairs.

"Ah, how dreadful. It was only ten years ago that they were loitering about Liberté et Égalité as if they owned the place. And to think, they may actually return... To what extent will our Republic's freedom and equality have to be sullied before they're satisfied...?"

"...If anything is sullyng the ideas of freedom and equality, Mother, it would be the words you just spoke."

"I beg your pardon?"

Seeing her mother's astonished expression, Lena truly did sigh this time. She just didn't understand. She honestly, truly, didn't understand. And it wasn't just her mother. Civilians throughout the Republic took pride in the five-hued flag and its values of freedom, equality, brotherhood, justice, and nobility. They believed they had learned from history and loathed tyranny, resented exploitation, scorned discrimination, and avoided murder and atrocities, seeing these as the devil's deeds.

But they simply did not understand that the Republic was committing those very same atrocities right now. And if you were to attempt to point that out, they would merely look at you with pity and ask, "Can't you tell pigs apart from people?" Lena bit her lip. Words truly were convenient. They could gloss over the truth so easily. All it took was a simple rewrite of a name tag, and you could reduce a human to a pig.

Her mother looked at her with a troubled expression but eventually smiled as if she'd come to a realization.

"Your father took pity on the livestock, and now you're taking after him. Is that it?"

"N-no, that's not..."

Lena did deeply respect her father, who'd greatly objected to the Eighty-Six's internment until the very end. But she didn't quite intend to follow in his footsteps. Because she could still remember that silhouette of a quadruped spider, the crest of a headless skeletal knight etched upon its armor, the extended hand that had saved her from disaster, those shades of brilliant red and jet-black he'd borne since birth.

We are Republic citizens. We were born in this country and raised in this country. And that's why...

Her mother's presumptuous voice pulled Lena out of her memories.

"But you should know, Lena. You should know to treat livestock as livestock. You simply cannot get those barbarian Eighty-Six to understand human ideals and nobility. It only makes sense that we confine them to their cages and manage their lives."

Lena wordlessly finished her breakfast, wiped her mouth with a napkin, and stood up.

"I'm off, Mother."

"You're changing my assigned squadron...?"

The golden wallpaper, streaked with dark-red stripes, gave the division commander's office a profound, dignified atmosphere. Lena blinked her silver eyes, her gaze fixed on the notice of personnel change she'd received from the division commander seated behind the antiquated desk, Commodore Karlstahl.

Squadron reorganizations and, by extension, changes of a Handler's assigned squadron actually happened fairly often. As they participated in battle after battle, squadrons gradually took increased losses to the point where continued combat became impossible. As such, squadrons were routinely integrated into one another, reorganized, abolished, and formed anew. Even transfers owing to the complete obliteration of a squadron were common, albeit a circumstance Lena had neither experienced personally nor had any desire to.

The Legion were simply that strong.

Having developed them with full ferocity and technological superiority, the militant Gadian Empire spared no expense when outfitting the Legion with the most advanced weapons and allowing them the utmost mobility possible, as well as capacity for autonomous thought so advanced it was hard to believe it was a product of this age's technology. On top of that, since they were truly unmanned drones, the Legion never tired, never disobeyed orders, and never knew fear. And no matter how many were destroyed, fully automated production and repair factories lay scattered across the depths of their territories, rolling out new units like the black smoke spewing from their chimneys.

Contrary to what the civilians believed, the Juggernaut was far inferior to the Legion in terms of performance, and the idea of getting out of a fight with the Legion with minor losses was unthinkable. Even if the Republic did inflict great damage on the Legion, they always returned in equal numbers, and the most the Republic could do was maintain a defensive line.

However, the squadron Lena was currently in charge of hadn't suffered that many losses.

Karlstahl's scarred cheeks slackened into a smile. His beard gave off a feeling of gentle dignity, and his frame was tall and broad-shouldered.

"Your squadron isn't getting reorganized or integrated. The truth is another squadron's Handler recently resigned, and we need to elect a replacement Handler from another squadron as quickly as possible."

"Is it a defensive unit for some important location?"

Which would mean it was a unit that couldn't remain on standby until a replacement Handler was found.

"Indeed. It's the eastern front's first ward's first defensive squadron, also known as the Spearhead squadron. It's a unit that consists of veterans from the eastern front... You could call it an elite unit."

That made Lena's beautiful features contort into a frown. The first ward was certainly an important location; it was an imperative defensive position where the Legion's advance was the fiercest. And the first defensive squadron was a significant unit that was single-handedly responsible for the first ward's defense. The duties placed on it, such as night patrol and serving as support, were entirely different compared to the second, third, and fourth squadrons, which served as backup in case the first wasn't able to sortie.

"I think this is too much responsibility to place on a novice like me, sir..."

Karlstahl smiled wryly.

"Is that something a talented, aspiring officer who was the youngest and first to be promoted to major out of ninety-one alumni should say? Being too modest can buy you others' ire, Lena."

"I-I'm sorry, Uncle Jérôme."

Karlstahl referred to Lena by her first name, and she responded by lowering her head in a manner unlike that of a subordinate. Karlstahl had been best friends with Lena's late father, who had fought alongside him nine years ago as part of the now demolished Republic Armed Forces. The two were among its sole survivors. He would come to visit often when Lena was small and play with her, and after her father's passing, he helped arrange the funeral, as well as support Lena and her family in various ways.

"I'll be frank with you... We don't have any other candidates for the Spearhead squadron's Handler."

"Didn't you say they were an elite unit? I would think being put in charge of that would be a great honor for any Republic soldier."

Not all Handlers took their jobs seriously, however. Some would watch television or play video games in the command room or leave it unattended altogether. Others would give their Processors terrible orders or not provide them information at all and watch as they died, as if it were just some movie. Others would place bets with their colleagues on whose squadron would get wiped out first. Lena knew that, of course. If anything, those who took their jobs seriously were the stark minority, but that was beside the point.

"Ah, well, it is an elite unit, but..."

Karlstahl seemed hesitant for a second.

"It's the Spearhead squadron's captain unit, Personal Name: Undertaker. He has something of, shall we say, a history."

Undertaker. What an odd name.

"The Handlers who know him seem to call him the Reaper and are all frightened of him... It seems he has a tendency to...*break* his Handlers."

"Huh?"

Lena replied in surprise despite herself. If it had been the other way around, that wouldn't have been so odd, but a Processor breaking a Handler?

How?

"Are you sure this isn't some kind of ghost story, sir?"

"I guarantee you I haven't had the luxury to call my subordinates over to discuss gossip, my dear... It's a fact that an unusually high number of Handlers who were in charge of Undertaker's squadrons have put in requests to change their assignments or requested to resign from service altogether. Some have requested transfers immediately after their first sortie, and while we're unsure as to whether it's related, some have committed suicide after resigning."

"Suicide, sir...?"

"It's rather hard to believe, but...they claimed they could 'hear the ghosts' voices' and were haunted by them even after retiring from service."

"..."

It didn't sound like anything but a ghost story, after all. Karlstahl cocked his head, anxiously trying to discern what Lena was thinking.

"If you're against the idea, feel free to refuse, Lena. You can stay in command of your current squadron, and as I've said, Spearhead is a gathering of veterans. From what I hear, Resonating with them during sorties isn't advised, so we could very well leave command to those on the field and provide minimal monitoring—"

Lena pursed her lips tensely.

"I'll do it. I'll put all my efforts into serving as the Spearhead squadron's commanding officer."

Protecting the motherland was a Republic citizen's duty and pride. Being put in charge of a unit that stood as the vanguard of the war effort was all she could ask for, and letting this opportunity pass by was unacceptable.

Karlstahl smiled at her fondly. Really, this girl is simply too much...

"You can do the absolute minimum. There's no need to do anything unnecessary... And also, refrain from interacting with the Processors too much."

"Knowing one's subordinates is part of a commanding officer's duties. So long as they don't reject me, I will make every effort to interact with them."

"Good grief..."

Karlstahl sighed with a gentle smile. He opened the desk's drawer and retrieved a bundle of documents.

"And while we're on the subject of fault finding, I've got something else to say. For heaven's sake, stop recording the number of casualties in your reports. There are officially no people on the battlefield, so we can't accept documents regarding data that doesn't exist... Even if you try to protest like this, there's no one who will take this matter to heart anymore."

"Be that as it may, I cannot simply ignore this... There's no basis for confining the Colorata anymore."

The Empire of Giad took the continent by storm with their army of Legion. But for some reason, it seemed to have fallen into ruin four years ago. The Empire transmissions the Republic was able to intercept in between waves of Eintagsfliege jamming suddenly ceased, and they had been unable to intercept them since. It was uncertain why the Empire fell; did the Legion turn against them, or was there some other reason? Whatever the case, one fact was abundantly clear: The Empire had certainly fallen.

The Eighty-Six were detained for being “progeny of the Empire,” but now that the Empire was gone, there was no justification for their continued internment. However, having tasted the perks of their blatant discrimination, the Republic’s civilians were loath to change their ways. Trampling others granted them the illusion of superiority, and having a group to oppress made them feel like they were the victors. Having been trapped, humiliated, and thrust into a state of emergency by the Empire and its superior weaponry, this was merely a form of escapism that allowed them to delude themselves, rather than confront the issue.

“Being tolerant of such wrongs is tantamount to supporting them. Doing this isn’t something that should be allowed in the—”

“Lena.”

That gentle invocation made Lena hold her tongue.

“Your pursuit of ideals is a bit too spirited, regardless of whether the ideals are your own or someone else’s. Ideals are precious *precisely because they are unreachable.*”

“...But...”

Karlstahl’s silver eyes wavered with bittersweet nostalgia.

“You really do take after Václav... Now then, Major Vladilena Milizé. I hereby appoint you to the role of commanding officer for the eastern front’s first ward’s first defensive squadron, effective as of today. I expect you to do your finest.”

“Thank you very much, sir.”

“...So you accepted the offer in the end? You really are a weirdo, Lena.”

Taking command of a new squadron meant quite a number of things would have to be changed as well, and one of those things was the target data for her Para-RAID. Annette was the officer in charge of the Para-RAID development team, so all requests regarding adjusting Lena’s Sensory Resonance settings were handled by her. She also suggested they may as well have Lena come in for a medical inspection while they were at it, and Lena was in the middle of changing back into her uniform when Annette chastised her.

After putting the patient gown neatly on a coat hanger, Lena replied to Annette from the other side of the medical room’s reinforced glass window, still buttoning her blouse. The medical ward’s building had once been a royal villa during the monarchy age, so its exterior was that of a chic, classy Middle Ages estate. But on the inside, it had a certain tasteless, futuristic

sort of design, defined by metal and glass panes that gave off a robotic, inorganic feeling. One of the glass screens had a video of tropical fish and coral reefs projected onto it.

"I mean, it's just a ghost story, Annette. An excuse soldiers cooked up to skip work."

Fastening both her stockings up with her garters, Lena felt her lips loosen with a smile. She did her periodic Para-RAID medical inspections regularly, so there was no need for Annette to worry. But she was a busybody, after all...

"The part about some of them committing suicide is true, though."

Sitting on the other side of the glass wall, Annette casually added this tidbit while inputting the new settings into Lena's RAID Device and sipping coffee—or rather, some muddy substance that was probably supposed to resemble coffee—from her mug.

"I don't buy the whole ghost thing. The old guys probably made that up so they'd have something to gossip about. But it's true. One blew his own head off with a shotgun."

Having put on her skirt and jacket, Lena turned around, straightening her collar. She brushed back the silver hair that spilled over her shoulders when she bent forward.

"Really?"

"We got a request to check that it wasn't some Para-RAID malfunction. Resignations aside, word tends to get out when someone kills himself."

"And what were the results?"



Annette shrugged casually.

"Who knows."

"Wh-what do you mean, who knows...?"

"What kind of details am I supposed to gather when the subject's dead? No abnormalities were detected in the RAID Device, and that's it. I did tell them that if they want me to look any deeper, they should bring over that Processor. Undertaker, I think he's called? But the boneheads over at Transport starting spouting dumb stuff like 'We don't have room for pigs on our flights.'"

Annette crossed her arms while leaning against the chair's backrest and snorted indignantly. This attitude always spoiled her boyish good looks.

"If they'd have brought him over, I'd have been able to pick apart his brain and investigate. Dammit."

Lena frowned at the ominous remark. Annette wasn't serious, of course, but it was still rather dark.

"...Hmm, how did you hear about the Processor...?"

"Heard about him from the MPs. They let me have a look at the report, but it really was just a bunch of official data. They asked me if anything came to mind, and that was it. No idea if he actually had anything to do with it."

Having said this, Annette smirked wryly.

"Apparently, when they told him his Handler died, all he said was 'Is that so?' Like he had no idea what they wanted him to make of it. Guess it makes sense for an Eighty-Six to feel that way, though. Even if you tell them their commanding officer died, they won't really care."

"..."

When she saw Lena's silent expression, the smile disappeared from Annette's face.

"...Lena, you should transfer over to the lab after all."

"?"

Annette watched Lena's baffled expression with lustrous, feline eyes.

"The way things are now, the military's nothing more than unemployment relief. Everywhere but the lab is full of idiots from the higher Sectors who couldn't hold a job."

The Republic's current administrative center was the First Sector, and it was at the heart of it all. The other Sectors spread out from its four sides in a rectangular fashion, designated numbers by order of closeness. The higher a Sector's number, the worse its residential environment, public safety, and standards of education became, and the higher its unemployment rate grew.

"What are you going to do in two years once the Legion aren't an issue anymore? Having 'former military personnel' on your résumé isn't gonna turn any heads during peacetime."

Lena smiled. In two years' time, all Legion units would shut down. That was a fact the Republic discerned by inspecting several Legion units they'd seized. The Legion's central processors had a fixed life span programmed into them: fifty thousand hours of operation time per version. In other words, just shy of six years. The Empire likely added this design element as a fail-safe to ensure the Legion didn't go berserk and turn on them.

And since the Empire was presumably destroyed four years ago, all of the Legion's central processors should break down and cease operation in two years' time. And indeed, the number of Legion they had detected on the battlefield had been gradually decreasing over the years. Units that hadn't received the latest updates had begun shutting down.

"Thanks for the offer. But right now, we are at war."

"Yeah, but this doesn't have to be *your* job."

Annette wasn't willing to back down. Completing the input job, she flicked the holo-screen aside, bent forward, and began venting her frustrations in an agitated, bitter voice.

"Whatever the truth is, that's one messed up Processor we're talking about here. Who knows what to expect from him... And besides, there's no telling if the Para-RAID is actually safe."

Lena's eyes widened.

"Wasn't it proven that the Para-RAID is perfectly safe?"

Annette had apparently just let slip something she shouldn't have. She lowered her voice, continuing to speak with a guilty expression that made it clear she'd just gotten herself in trouble.

"I mean, don't you know how this country works, Lena? Even if they say that's how it is publicly, it doesn't mean it's actually true."

The Republic prided itself on being a superior race and on the country's technology being infallible. Even if there were any flaws, they could never be made public. This held true for the Para-RAID...and just as true for the Juggernauts.

"They actually discovered this technology by inspecting people with, well, extrasensory perception. That's how they figured out what part of the brain to stimulate...which is what this thing does."

She poked the RAID Device in her hand: a blue crystal and a delicate silver frame. The crystal was currently connected by several wires to an information terminal, as the information inside it was being overwritten.

"Those Espers could Resonate with other family members, so the Handler and Processor devices carry quasi-genetic information that identifies the users as relatives on the second degree. We still don't know how the Resonance actually works."

"But...wasn't this your father's research?"

"It was collaborative research. The fundamental theory and hypothesis were all the work of other researchers. Dad was just in charge of preparing the lab conditions and replicating the phenomenon with the recruited test subjects."

"So you just need to ask the other researcher."

A cold smile played over Annette's face.

"You can't. The other researcher was an Eighty-Six."

The Eighty-Six, who were considered subhuman, didn't have their names recorded. When they were taken into custody, they each received a number as their sole identifier. At this point, there was no way of even knowing which internment camp they'd been sent to.

"The RAID Device has a safety lock on it now, but if anyone was to try to Resonate with several people's sense of vision, their brain would fry itself from the informational overload, and if you stay Resonated for too long at maximum synchronization rate, it's possible for your ego to completely collapse. You stay too 'stimulated' to be able to come back... You know about my dad's accident, right?"

"..."

Annette's father, Professor Josef von Penrose, was involved in an accident during an experiment that drove him mad and ultimately killed him. It happened shortly after the completion of the Sensory Resonance theory and the RAID Device. The RAID Device's synchronization rate was accidentally set to the theoretical maximum. Some believed he connected to somewhere that lay beyond the human collective unconscious. If humankind as a whole was an individual, that place was the collective—what was presumed to be the collective unconscious of the world itself.

"So like I said, there's no telling what might happen if you use the Para-RAID too much... I don't give a rat's ass what happens to a bunch of Eighty-Six, but if anything happened to you, I don't know what I'd do..."

Lena grimaced grumpily despite herself. She realized Annette was genuinely concerned for her, but still...

"But that's...that's just cowardice."

Annette waved her hand as if to say she'd grown tired of the conversation.

"Yeah, yeah. I swear, you're a weirdo..."

An awkward silence filled both sides of the room parted by the glass wall. As if to dispel that, Annette smiled mischievously.

"While we're on the topic of things that make you act weird... Lena, you up for some chiffon cake? It's my latest work. Made from real eggs."

"Huh?"

Annette had to stop herself from laughing out loud as Lena looked up at her, an imaginary pair of cat ears perking up in attention. Lena was as much a girl as any other young lady her age, after all. Sweet things captured her attention in a heartbeat, and a chiffon cake made from real egg whites was a rare commodity in the Republic at present, due to the lack of available space or time to construct poultry farms. Raising chickens in her estate's garden was the kind of precious luxury only the daughter of the Penrose family, formerly a noble house, could afford.

However...

"Hmm... It won't taste like cheese even though you didn't put cheese in it, or be all charred and smoky, or look like a frog, will it...?"

These were the impressions of someone who had tasted the cream puffs Annette had made once. That last comment was an abbreviated version of "the bulging, run-over corpse of a toad." Putting aside its shape, Annette had somehow managed to replicate a toad's color to a startling degree of accuracy.

"This one's safe to eat. I had the guy who came over for my arranged marriage test them."

Although he'd fainted, frothing at the mouth after the fifth prototype chocolate.

"Then I guess that's fine... But even if you don't like him, be sure to give him some chocolate that's actually safe to eat, okay?"

"Of course I will. I even wrapped it up all cute-like, with pink wrapping paper and a ribbon and everything. Even put a message card with a kiss mark on it that says, 'To my darling Theobald'... Left it in the mailbox of the apartment he's renting with his mistress."

It took Lena a while to decide whether she should feel bad for him or not.

Having returned home, Lena attached the RAID Device—which had finished having its data rewritten while she'd been chatting with Annette over a chiffon cake and some tea—to her neck. It was in the shape of an elegant silver choker, engraved with a subtle Alba ornamental pattern. Small, sparkling beads surrounded the quasi-nerve crystal, making it hard to believe this small choker served the same function as a military-grade communication headset.

Her talk with Annette this afternoon suddenly came to mind. The Reaper. The Eighty-Six who drove people to suicide, who didn't flinch from the prospect of death.

What kind of person was he?

Does he...hate us, after all?

Lena shook her head once and took a deep breath. All right.

"—Activate."

She booted up the Para-RAID. This cutting-edge method of communication could be used regardless of time and place and ignored all interference by distance, weather, or terrain.

Synchronization complete. No issues during connection. Static rustled in her ears, different from the sounds of the room she was in.

"Handler One to all units in the Spearhead squadron. It's a pleasure to meet you all. I will be serving as your commanding officer starting today."

There was a long, somewhat hesitant pause. Lena found that disheartening. No one in the squadron knew how to respond to an officer greeting them for the first time like this, even though that should be proper etiquette among fellow humans.

But the hesitation disappeared from the line after a moment, and a quiet, young-sounding voice responded from the other side of her Resonated senses.

“Pleased to meet you, Handler One. This is the Spearhead squadron’s captain, Personal Name: Undertaker, speaking.”

Contrary to his ominous name, his pronunciation and enunciation were accurate and clear, and his voice was as serene as a deep forest lake. It was a boy roughly her age, probably originally from a middle-class or higher family.

“I’ve been informed of the change in Handlers. I wish you luck in your endeavors going forward.”

Lena smiled, able to vividly imagine his silent disposition from his detached tone. Yes, she could tell easily by simply conversing with him like this, and there was no way he could deceive her.

They were human beings.

They were not something subhuman, something known only as an Eighty-Six.

“I wish the same to you. I look forward to working with you, Undertaker.”

EASTERN
FRONT
ROUGH
SKETCH

MAP

THE REPUBLIC OF SAN MAGNOLIA

Sectors
2-85

THE REPUBLIC'S
FIRST SECTOR—
HANDLER HEADQUARTERS

The First Sector functions as the eighty-five Sectors' capital city and is roughly the size of the Yamanote Line. Lena gives her orders from a command room in the First Sector's military headquarters.

THE EIGHTY-FIVE SECTORS

Their area is roughly twenty-three thousand square kilometers (making it somewhat smaller than Japan's Kanto region). The population density rises the closer each Sector is to the perimeter.

THE GREAT
FORTRESS WALLS—
GRAN MULE

Steel fortress walls erected to protect the eighty-five Sectors. (Technically, they're not walls, but a series of fortifications that create the appearance of walls.)

120 km
(estimate)

ANTIPERSONNEL/ANTI-TANK
MINEFIELD AND AUTONOMOUS
INTERCEPTION CANNON
(ONE POSITION)

Put in place in order to prevent a Legion invasion. An antipersonnel interception system was installed as insurance in case the armed Eighty-Six on the battlefield decided to rebel. Several of these systems were installed along the road to the Republic.

THE EASTERN FRONT'S
FIRST WARD'S
FIRST DEFENSIVE SQUADRON
SPEARHEAD'S BASE

Stationed more than one hundred kilometers away from the Republic, adjacent to the front lines along the border with the Legion's eastern territories. All supplies are delivered via airplane, and unauthorized personnel are not allowed to come or go from the base.

Legion-controlled
territories



CHAPTER 2

ALL QUIET ON THE SKELETAL FRONT

ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY-NINE DAYS TILL I END MY SERVICE! FUCKIN' GLORY TO THE SPEARHEAD SQUADRON!

In the back of the weatherworn barracks' hangar, a countdown message was scrawled in big letters with colored chalk on a blackboard someone had picked up. Raising his eyes from the clipboard in his hands, Shin's gaze was met with this celebratory sentence. There would have been 119 days left, to be exact. Kujo had jotted this message down the day he joined the squadron and updated it every morning.

But Kujo'd died ten days ago.

Glancing briefly at the interrupted countdown message, Shin eventually shifted his attention back to the maintenance report on the clipboard he was holding. He'd been walking down the hangar lined with Juggernauts on standby, making his way to his own unit, which had just finished being serviced.

He had a Pyrope's bloodred eyes and an Onyx's jet-black hair. These two traits came from his noble, mixed, half-Aquila, half-Rubela blood and set him apart from the other Eighty-Six, who generally fell under the category of Colorata.

His calm expression, unbecoming his age, gave his handsome features a certain cold quality, and his slender build and pale features were characteristic of the old Empire's nobility.

Despite serving on the eastern front, which consisted mostly of forests, prairies, and strips of wetland, he wore a desert-camouflage uniform with shades of sandy brown and gray, which he'd gotten from the Republic's unsold stocks. There were no officers to rebuke him for it, so he kept his collar loose, with a sky-blue scarf wrapped around his neck peeping out of it.

The sound of machinery and the maintenance crew's shouts echoed loudly through the operating hangar, mixing with the cheers of a few of his comrades playing two-on-two basketball in the plaza in front of the hangar and a guitar strumming out a jingle from an old cartoon. Fellow squad member Kino, seated in his own unit's cockpit with its canopy open and reading a porno magazine, noticed Shin passing by and raised his hand in greeting.

Despite it being the front lines, on days without sorties, the base's personnel tended to become rather bored. Usually, they were required to

patrol the contested zones every day, but they never did, as there was no need. Still, on paper and according to the reports they submitted to the Handlers, they should currently be in the middle of patrol.

Some of them who felt like going for a walk were out in the ruins of nearby cities, scavenging for materials. Everyone else was doing their chores (cooking, laundry, cleaning, or tending to the fields and the chickens at the back of the base) or otherwise just passing the time however they pleased.

The sound of rugged military boots approached him, and a thick voice shook the hangar with a roar that would make even a tank stop in its tracks.

"Shin! Shinei Nouzen! Ya fucked it all up again, ya little shit!"

Kino jumped out of the cockpit and scurried into the shadows like a startled cockroach while Shin patiently waited for the voice's owner to approach him.

"What's up?"

"Don't you 'What's up?' me, Undertaker! Fuckin' hell!"

The person who closed in on Shin like a crazed hellhound was a fifty-something-year-old member of the maintenance crew. His hair was a grizzled graying-ash color, and he wore sunglasses and oil-stained work clothes. It was Lev Aldrecht, the Spearhead squadron's maintenance division captain. Shin, who was about to turn sixteen this year, was considered a veteran among the soldiers on the battlefield, but Aldrecht went straight beyond veteran and into senior territory, being a survivor who'd served in the war nine years ago.

"Why d'ya gotta wreck your unit every friggin' time ya sortie?! The actuator and damper are rattlin' all over the place! I keep tellin' ya the suspension unit's weak, so why d'ya keep pushin' it like that?!"

"I'm sorry."

"You think yer apology's gonna fix this?! I ain't telling you to apologize—I'm telling you to change yer ways! That crazy fightin' style of yours is gonna get ya killed one day! We're outta spare parts, so I can't fix yer rig until we restock!"

"My spare?"

"Ah, yeah, the spare. We do have a spare, don't we? Gotta have one when the captain keeps trashing his rig left and right. Ya come to us for repairs three times more than any other Processor. D'ya think yer some kind of prince or somethin'?! Huh?!"

"The Republic abolished the class system in the revolution three hundred years ago."

"Son, I have half a mind to beat the piss outta you right now... Considerin' how fast ya trash your units, unless we getcha three rigs to ride in, there's no way we can keep up with repairs. When ya consider the amount of time till we get restocked compared to how often you guys sortie, there's no way we can keep up! Whaddaya expect me to do, pray real hard

so yer rig doesn't break? Or maybe pray to the scrap-metal fairies to collect yer bits and pieces, huh?!"

"Didn't Fido retrieve Kujo's unit?"

Aldrecht fell silent at Shin's matter-of-fact tone.

"Well, yeah, I could take the parts I need from Kujo's rig...but I'd rather avoid cannibalizin' other units. I mean, are ya okay with that? I'd be puttin' parts from a unit that got someone killed in yer rig."

Shin tilted his head and knocked on his Juggernaut's—Undertaker's—armor with the back of his hand. Beneath the canopy was his Personal Mark, a headless skeleton carrying a shovel.

Aldrecht smirked bitterly.

"Yeah, too late for that, I suppose... Ain't that right, Undertaker?"

Nodding pensively, the aged mechanic looked at the spring fields spreading out beyond the open shutters. A cloudless sky stretched out overhead, its azure hues seeming as if they would consume any- and everything. The fields of blue cornflowers and the greenery of new leaves blanketed the plains with a mesmerizingly beautiful mosaic. This served as the grave marker for the skeletons of millions of Eighty-Six who'd died on the battlefield.

The Eighty-Six weren't buried in graves. There could be no graves when there were no casualties. Even collecting their remains was forbidden. Pigs masquerading as humans were denied the right to rest in peace, or even the right to mourn their dead comrades. This was the world their motherland fabricated nine years ago, the facade they maintained even now.

"I hear Kujo got blown to bits."

"Yeah."

A self-propelled mine—a badly made antipersonnel weapon consisting of a fuselage filled with explosives, with rod-shaped limbs and a spherical head, undetectable from afar by the naked eye. One had latched onto Kujo, who'd mistaken it for an injured soldier. It had been a nighttime battle, a mission to rescue another unit.

"That's good. Means he passed on."

"Probably."

Shin believed not in heaven or hell, but in someplace else that wasn't here. Somewhere they could go back to. Aldrecht laughed deeply.

"Kujo was lucky that in the end he got to be in the same unit as you... And so are they."

They could hear voices cheering excitedly outside as the ball rattled the torn net. The guitar's off-tune chorus echoed all the way back to the fields behind the barracks. Aldrecht knew this was a sight you couldn't find in any other squadron.

Sortie after sortie. Daily patrols in anticipation of a Legion attack. Suspense and fear gradually wore down the Processors' nerves as they lost more and more comrades with every passing battle. In such an extreme situation, where living to see the next morning was the best one could do,

they didn't even have the luxury to consider amusement or a humane lifestyle. But that wasn't true for this squadron. Even if they did have to go on the offensive, they never had to worry about a surprise attack.

"...It's thanks to you they can live like this, Shin."

"But I still give you guys three times the amount of repair work compared to a normal Processor."

Aldrecht chuckled loudly. Shin gazed back into the pair of eyes looking at him bitterly from behind the sunglasses and shrugged.

"I swear, you little shit... Thought I finally got you to crack a joke, and that's what you come up with."

"I really do feel sorry, even if I can't act on that apology."

"Ya damn idiot. Makin' sure you kids come back alive is the maintenance team's job. Long as we can make sure that happens, we don't give a rat's ass about what happens to the units, and we'll do whatever we gotta do to get 'em back in workin' order."

Having said that in one go, Aldrecht turned to look the other way. He was apparently embarrassed.

"Oh, right. I heard yer Handler got changed again. What's the new one like?"

There was a pause.

"...Yeah."

"The hell d'ya mean by 'Yeah,' ya blockhead?"

Shin had changed Handlers so often that telling them apart was difficult, and Processors weren't supposed to be that aware of their Handler's existence to begin with. That was just how much they neglected their jobs. And once enough Eintagsfliege got deployed, the radar and data transmissions stopped functioning, so it became impossible to maintain command from a distant base. That was why Processors didn't rely on Handlers and didn't really care much if they were present or not.

In the end, a Handler's job boiled down to monitoring the Processors. Thanks to the collar known as the Para-RAID, no matter the place or time, they could always know every word that came out of a Processor's mouth. The only job expected of the Handlers was to serve as a suppressant that kept the Eighty-Six's rebellious intentions in check.

Shin opened his mouth to speak, recalling the few exchanges he'd had with her this week. The first thing that came to mind was...

"My paperwork's increased. I guess I'll have to start faking my patrol reports every day now."

"...Yer probably the only one with balls big enough to keep sendin' the same report ya fabricated five years ago every time just because they don't actually read 'em, Shin."

He didn't even bother changing the date or location, and since he hadn't gone on patrol since, the content was all random nonsense. Shin was honestly surprised no one had noticed after all this time.

'It seems you accidently sent me the wrong file...'

When she'd gently pointed that out with her voice like a clear silver bell, Shin couldn't help but sigh a bit. She had laughed calmly, saying he "could be surprisingly careless sometimes" in a tone filled with friendliness and genuine goodwill.

"She Resonated the day she got appointed and said she wanted to continue these exchanges, so she'll be syncing up with us daily. Unusual for a Republic soldier."

"So she's a decent person, huh? ...Must be hard to live like that. Poor thing."

Shin was in total agreement, which was why he chose to say nothing. Justice and ideals carried no weight in this world, no matter how much you tried to will them into reality—

"...Hmm."

Shin suddenly shifted his gaze off into the distance, beyond the spring fields, as if he'd just heard something call for him.

"Ta-daa! This is what they really mean by 'the godforsaken pigs who live outside the Gran Mule'!"

"That's in bad taste, Haruto."

They were in the barracks' kitchen. Theo, whose hobby was drawing, cut down his squad mate's joke as he kept watch over a boiling pot of berry jam while jotting something down in his sketchbook. He had a Jade's golden hair and emerald eyes and, despite turning sixteen this year, had a small, slender stature. Having dropped a large boar's carcass at the back garden's side entrance, Haruto, who was a Rubis, lowered his hands, which he spread out jokingly, and scratched his head. He'd gone hunting in the nearby forest, even though it wasn't his turn today.

"Yeah, can't get the punch line down right. You were supposed to laugh just now."

"It made me nauseous instead, to be frank. But still, I gotta hand it to ya..."

Putting his sketchbook aside, Theo fixed his gaze on the game Haruto had brought. He'd likely hauled it in with his Juggernaut, but carrying such a monstrosity large boar all on his own had probably still required a lot of effort.

"Amazing. That's one hell of a catch."

Haruto laughed happily, pleased with the compliment.

"Isn't it, though?! We're having barbecue tonight, after all! Where did Raiden wander off to? And Anju, too. I gotta trade cooking duties today."

"Yeah, out of everyone, Shin's in charge of that today. Raiden's in 'town,' gathering materials, and Anju's got laundry duty today. The rest of the girls went with her."

Haruto's gaze suddenly fixed on Theo.

"Wait. When did that happen?"

"I think right after breakfast?"

"And it's almost noon now."

"That's right."

"....."

Even if they had to do the whole base's laundry, it wouldn't take six of them all morning to get it all done. And their washhouse was on the riverbank. Plus, today was a hot, clear spring day. Haruto suddenly became excited.

"It means they're bathing! The riverbank is heaven on earth right now, you know?!"

"I should probably tell you this before they really do send you to heaven, but they're all armed!"

Haruto stiffened in place. Theo sighed, stirring the pot with a bamboo ladle. Seeing the pot had finally boiled down, he put out the fire. Just as he placed the lid, he felt the Para-RAID activate. When he first enlisted, a RAID Device had been implanted in the back of his neck, along with an ear-cuff-shaped data tag that listed other targets he could Resonate with. Then came the rush of illusory heat that signified the activation of these two devices. Theo pressed his finger against the ear cuff and switched on the signal transmission.

"Activate. Ah."

Theo's Jade eyes became colder when he realized who had just contacted him. He exchanged glances with Haruto, whose smile disappeared the moment he pressed his own ear cuff, and spoke to the person who'd Resonated with them.

"Shin... What happened?"

The squadron did their laundry on the banks of a river that was always bustling with water despite its small size. It was near that river's banks that the female squadron members were playing in the water, frolicking and splashing with one another.

"What are you doing, Kaie? Don't just stand there—come in already!"

Seeing her friend loitering a short distance away and fidgeting, Kurena stopped the game of tag and called to her. She had short-bobbed, chestnut-colored Agate hair and catlike Topaz eyes. She'd removed the top of her field uniform and tied it around her waist, exposing her olive-drab tank top—and the curvy figure beneath it—to the sun, but since everyone else was wearing the same outfit, she didn't feel embarrassed.

"N-nah, I just... Y'know, I just thought this outfit was sorta embarrassing..."

Despite her boyish mannerisms, Kaie, the black-haired, black-eyed, petite Orienta, was unmistakably still a girl. She seemed quite bothered by the way her wet tank top clung to her skin, her face crimson. Her ponytail, long enough to look like it could fit on the back of a knight's helmet, clung to her skin and entwined all the way down her neck and into her cleavage. It was, admittedly, a rather alluring sight.

"I mean... Is it really okay...? Playing around in the water without calling the others— *Appfuu!*"

Anju, who had been rinsing her long silvery-blue hair until now, scooped up water with both hands and splashed it at Kaie. She hadn't taken off her uniform top but had unzipped it all the way down below her navel. A rather daring display, given her modest nature. As her hair color suggested, she had thick Adularia blood, but her pale-blue Celesta eyes were inherited from her great-grandmother's grandmother. This alone would mark her as an Eighty-Six by the Republic, which placed utmost importance on purity of blood.

"Lighten up, Kaie. It's fine; we finished the laundry already."

The other girls joined in as well.

"I mean, Shin knew about this when he gave us the okay to come here, didn't he?"

"Oh yeah. He said today was gonna be hotter than usual, and then he actually smiled a bit, which was unusual."

"It's times like this that that stone-faced captain of ours can actually be pretty cool."

She then swiftly turned her gaze to Kurena and smiled apologetically.

"Ah, sorry for not catching on, Kurena... Both you and Shin don't have any duties right now, so we should have probably thought of some excuse to leave you two alone."

"Wh-wh-wh-what are you saying?! I-it's not like that at all!"

"I don't get what you see in him. You can never tell what's going through his head."

"I keep telling you, I don't *see* anything in him. It's not like that!"

"By the way, what do you think about him, Kaie?"

"Who, Shin? He's pretty cute. I'm totally into the 'silent and stoic' thing he's got goin' on."

"Wh-what the—? Kaie?!"

Kaie had to stifle a laugh at Kurena's panicked expression. She was too obvious.

"Right, right, I get it. If none of you have your sights on him, maybe I can go in for the kill tonight. It's an eastern tradition, you know... A girl sneaks into a guy's room in the dead of night and..."

"K-Kaie?! I—I, uh, don't get me wrong, I don't feel anything for Shin, but I don't think that's such a good idea! You should stick to those, uh, you know, *yamato nadeshiko* etiquettes and stuff! So I mean, you get it, right...?"

The girls all smirked, watching Kurena become increasingly flustered by the second.

""""""Kurena, you're so cute!!!""""""

Realizing she'd been baited, Kurena cried out in frustration.

"You bullies!"

"Ah, there's the Kurena pout!"

The thicket next to them rustled, and suddenly, their squad mate Daiya popped out of it. Daiya had blond hair and blue eyes, as was typical of the Sapphira.

He was also, incidentally, a boy.

""""""Kyaaa!""""""

"Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Being bombarded by both the powerful ultrasonic weapon all women were blessed with at birth and a barrage of every possible solid object within arm's reach, Daiya retreated to the relative safety of the other side of the thicket.

"Hey, what the hell?! Who just threw their gun at me?! Those things are loaded! Are you out of your damn minds?!"

""""""Kyaaa!""""""

"Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Taking a clear hit from the girls' second wave of carpet-bombing, Daiya fell completely silent. The other girls gave Anju a backward glance while fixing their disheveled clothes as she approached Daiya.

"So what did you come here for, Daiya?"

"It'd heal my broken bones if you'd ask *Are you okay?* in a cute voice right about now, Anju."

"Oh my, are you okay, Daiya, darling."

"Oh, God, I'm sorry. Forgive me. I'll never ask for that again—just please stop talking in monotone with that expressionless look on your face. I'm gonna cry."

Having zipped her uniform all the way up to its fastener, Kaie looked up, confirming the other girls had fixed their outfits as well.

"You can come out now, Daiya. What happened?"

"Oh, right. The thing is, I started working as a messenger today."

Apparently, he had a message for them. Kurena pouted, still hugging the top of her uniform with her arms to cover her curvy figure.

"You could have just used the Para-RAID. Why come all the way here for that?"

"I mean, syncing into a bunch of girls gossiping would be awkward for everyone, wouldn't it? You wouldn't want me to sync in and catch you saying something like *Hey girls, I wuv Shin!* would you?"

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-wha—?!"

Hearing Daiya imitate her in a sickeningly cute tone she would never actually use, Kurena went red all the way up to her ears. Meanwhile, all the other girls (except for Kaie) began chattering.

"Can't say I agree with what you did, but that judgment is more or less accurate."

"I mean, we'd think it was hilarious, but poor Kurena would probably bury herself alive."

"That's pretty much what happened, isn't it?"

"Wait—I've got it. We should trick her into saying it next time and have Shin sync in while she does. That'll be a spectacle!"

"Kurena's reaction would be the only interesting part about it. Shin wouldn't even move a muscle, with that iron mask of a face."

"I—I never said that! Cut that out!"

"Kurena, you're so cute!!!"

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah, you bullies!!!"

At the sound of everyone present (Daiya included) doting on her, Kurena screamed in desperation.

Her shoulders still shaking as she laughed, Kaie looked over at Daiya.

"No, but really, what's the message?"

Daiya's expression went blank at the question.

"Yeah. It's from Shin."

At those words, the girls' expressions tensed immediately.

Man shall not live on bread alone.

These words had been spoken by some patronizing messiah thousands of years ago, but Raiden thought there might be some wisdom in them after all. Life needed things like candy or coffee—or even less tangible things like games and music—to truly feel fulfilling. The Republic's white pigs who threw them into this hell didn't feel the need to give their livestock anything more than the bare minimum of food to keep them alive. If you took that sentence and examined it from another perspective, it meant that, quality of life aside, people could not live without food to eat.

"All righty then, Fido. Here's a little test for you."

They frequented the ruins of some nameless city when scavenging for preserved foods, overgrown vegetables, livestock that had gone feral, or abandoned commodities. In a square littered with rubble, the squadron's vice captain, Raiden, took a can of synthesized rations they'd received from the base's production plant and placed it on the concrete next to a piece of preserved bread he'd found in the city hall's emergency storage.

He wore an unkempt field uniform over his sinewy limbs, and his reddish-black hair, evidence of his pureblood Eisen heritage, was trimmed short, while his expression and features had a wild, sharp aspect to them.

He was facing a familiar Scavenger. This clumsy drone, which accompanied Juggernauts on the battlefield and supplied them with replacement energy packs and ammunition, had a square, angular body and ran on four legs. Fido leaned over, its lens-based optical sensor fixedly observing the objects set in front of it.

"Which one's trash and which one's food?"

"Pi."

Fido immediately extended a crane arm and flicked the synthetic ration away. Watching the white lump roll away, Raiden took a bite from the bread. *Even a damn drone can tell this synthetic glob is trash. What were the white pigs thinking, trying to pass this off as food?*

Internment camps and bases all had production plants and automated factories attached to them, so they could produce all the commodities they would need on their own. Adjustment of the production rates and power were all provided from the other side via underground cables.

It was a needlessly elaborate, large-scale feeding system, which meant the Republic spared no expense so long as it meant they didn't have to actually have contact with their so-called pigs. The food and goods produced by the factory were truly the bare essentials, and despite being called food, the rations they got every day looked like plastic explosives for some reason. And it went without saying that they tasted like crap.

So if they wanted to eat anything remotely decent, they had to scour ruins left behind nine years ago, like this one, for food and provisions. Thankfully, this squadron didn't have to worry about doing patrols, meaning they had ample time and energy packs to hunt through these ruins, with the Juggernauts handling the heavy lifting.

"All right, Fido, today's provision objective is anything that's not like that garbage. Gather as much food as you find and haul it back home."

"Pi."

Fido loudly imitated Raiden, who rose from his squat, and began gathering whatever useful items it could find. From pieces of Juggernaut wreckage to fragments of used shells, it picked up anything that could be recycled and used again and loaded it into a container that it would later haul back to base. That was one of the jobs the Scavengers were made to do.

Incidentally, *Scavenger* was not the true designation for these machines but rather the nickname they were given. After all, they would pick parts off crushed Juggernauts—and even other Scavengers that fell in combat—and scour the battlefields for scrap even when there weren't any engagements going on. None of the Processors referred to them by their official name, choosing more blatantly to call them Scavengers—cannibalizing waste pickers. They were both trusty companions who saved them from having to worry about running out of ammo or energy and, at the same time, mechanical vultures that greedily devoured the remains of their fallen brethren.

Fido was a Scavenger that had been following and obeying Shin for around five years now. It was apparently part of one of Shin's old units—and one of the only two survivors of a battle that wiped everyone else out, the other survivor being Shin. Shin apparently hauled Fido, the only machine that wasn't completely destroyed, back to base, and they'd been together ever since.

It was unthinkable that a waste-gathering machine would have the capacity to feel something as complicated as gratitude, even if it did have some penchant for autonomous learning. But Fido appeared to have designated Shin as the target of highest priority when it came to restocking and followed him no matter how many times Shin changed units, always

remaining at his side on every sortie. It was the kind of loyalty one couldn't expect out of other, less accommodating Scavengers.

Judging by its model number, Fido was from early in the war, when Scavengers had only just been introduced to the battlefield. Having been in operation for as long as it had, Fido had likely learned a great deal more than its brethren had. And seeing it follow him around loyally as it did, Shin decided to name it Fido. The kind of name one might give a dog, like Whitey or Lucky... The guy definitely had a few screws loose.

"Pi."

"Hmm?"

Raiden turned to find Fido, which had been following in his footsteps, suddenly at a halt. Tracing the gaze of its optical sensor, Raiden spotted a discolored, crumbling skeletal corpse resting beneath a large tree that grew in a flower bed lying in the shadow of the wreckage.

"...Oh."

Realizing that was why the Scavenger had called him, Raiden approached the corpse. Its uniform was crumbling, and the assault rifle it held in its hands had turned red from rust. The fact that a dog tag was dangling from the body's collarbone made it clear it wasn't an Eighty-Six. This was probably a soldier of the Republic Armed Forces who had died nine years ago.

Fido, staying a short distance behind Raiden, beeped at him again. It was the inquisitive beep that asked whether it should bring something back. For times without combat, Shin had taught Fido to prioritize the collection of the belongings of those who fell in battle, since the white pigs had deliberately forbidden the retrieval of their corpses.

Raiden shook his head.

"Nah, it's okay... This guy's already got a damn good grave."

Raiden knew this tree. It was a sakura: a cherry blossom tree. It was common in the continent's east, its flowers flourishing brilliantly during the spring. Earlier this spring, the whole base had visited the sakura trees on the main road here at Kaie's suggestion. The sight of the fluttering petals reflected in the pale moonlight in the dead of night was so beautiful, it evoked the image of the afterlife.

There was no point in burying this soldier in the cold, dark earth when he had his own pillow of cherry blossoms from which to look up at the sakura tree. This might be the corpse of an Alba, but it was still the remains of a soldier who'd died on the battlefield. Treating him like a pig wouldn't feel right.

After offering a silent prayer for the departed soul, Raiden raised his head. An illusory heat tingled from his ear cuff.

"Hunting party, do you read?"

"Theo? What is it?"

The voice was clear, as if he'd been standing right next to him. The Resonance was aimed at everyone exploring the ruins, but Raiden answered on the group's behalf.

"Change of forecast. There's a shower coming."

Raiden's eyes narrowed grimly. As he looked up in the direction of the Legion's territory, even his keen eyes could just barely make out the subtle shade of a few silvery sparkles that had begun spreading out in the sky. A swarm of flying Legion, the shape and size of butterflies, that absorbed and deflected electromagnetic waves and rays of visible light—the Eintagsfliege. They were the cornerstone of the Legion offensive, spreading out before an attack to confuse and jam radars and communications, masking the full brunt of the enemy force.

"When?"

"About two hours from now. Apparently, the force closest to us regrouped with another that was behind them. They're probably restocking. They should advance on us as soon as they're finished."

While close, the Legion were still out of sight, and at this point, no radar would be able to detect the enemy forces. And yet, Theo—or rather, the person whose words he was relaying—described the situation as if he were seeing it with his own eyes.

"Roger that. We'll be back soon. —Chise, Kuroto. You heard that, right? Regroup at the entrance to route twelve."

"Roger."

"There's no Shepherd this time, either, so they'll probably just try to brute force us. It depends on their route, of course, but if we ambush them near point 304, we should be able to mop them up in one go."

Theo spoke with discernible traces of a smile. Raiden made his way to his unit, which was waiting for him a short distance from there, giving orders to the rest of the hunting party all the while. His lips also curled into a ferocious smile.

"So it's just a bunch of Sheep. It'll be like shooting fish in a barrel."

It would by no means be an easy fight, but Sheep that only followed simple tactics were far, far easier to defeat than an army led by a Shepherd. Knowing ahead of time that there were no terribly dangerous enemies coming was a huge relief. *Seriously, our Reaper really is*— But that was where Raiden's thoughts ground to a halt. The boy grimaced.

How did the red-eyed Reaper feel about this, really, as he wandered the battlefield in search of his lost head?

By the time Raiden and the rest of the hunting party returned to base, the other seventeen units were already set to launch. Theo waited in front of his own unit near the hangar's entrance, greeting them with a smile like a mischievous cat.

"You're laaaate, Raiden. I almost thought you stepped on a land mine on the way here."

"Shut it—I'm not late. And don't joke about mines. It's still too soon."

“Ah... Sorry.”

Kujo had gotten blown up by a self-propelled mine. In the two months since this squadron was formed, he was the third casualty. The rate at which Processors died was exceptionally high. One hundred thousand enlisted yearly, but within a year, less than a thousand remained.

They were still better off than their parents, who had to throw themselves headfirst into the fight. It's said that back during the days when the only strategy they had was to charge at the Legion with archaic rocket launchers or explosives in hand, each squadron would lose half its troops within a day. Compared to that, this squadron's losses were not as devastating, but they were still on the front lines. There wasn't a single battle without losses. Death was the only thing that came equally—and suddenly—to all.

“We're all here, right? At attention.”

Called by that quiet yet surprisingly clear voice, everyone straightened their backs. Before anyone knew it, silently and solemnly as the midnight moon, Shin stood in front of the first ward's map, scribbling important notes onto an operation map in a transparent file. His features were as pale as ever, and he wore his iconic camouflage clothes and the rank insignia on his shoulders that marked him as a captain. That blue scarf, which he wore even now, was only one reason for his ominous alias, as if the Reaper were trying to cover the spot where his head once rested...

“I'll explain the situation.”

The faces of all in attendance were reflected in the cold red eyes of this squad captain, who bore the name Reaper.

Finishing that concise but extremely clear briefing—that detailed everything from the enemy's numbers, to their routes, down to the tactics they should employ—the Processors all boarded their Juggernauts. They were all child soldiers from their mid to late teens, the youth still obvious in their features and physiques.

Inserting the last few parts they needed into the canopy, twenty-one armored weapon systems awakened from their brief slumber: the Piloted Autonomous Unmanned Polypedal Armored Weapons, M1A4 Juggernauts. Four long, jointed legs. A small, organic-looking torso, reminiscent of a chrysalis, its armor colored whitish brown like the color of old bones. It was equipped with a grappling sub-arm, a heavy machine gun, a set of a wire and an anchor, and an arm-mounted 57 mm smoothbore gun.

Its overall silhouette resembled that of a prowling spider, but the two grappling arms and its brandished main battery were reminiscent of a scorpion's tail and pincers. The Eighty-Six's closest companion, as well as their final resting place.

Having chosen the shadows of a crumbling church in the city ruins as his hiding spot for the ambush, Shin opened his eyes within his Juggernaut's cramped cockpit. They designated the main street as the kill zone and

deployed each platoon's units in such a way that their lines of fire wouldn't intersect.

Shin's first platoon and Kaie's fourth platoon served as vanguard and suppressing fire, respectively, and were spread out along the main street's left and right sides. Daiya's fifth platoon handled explosive munitions, and Kurena's sixth platoon handled sniping, blocking the street's edge with their Juggernauts.

Even without looking at the optical screens, Shin could sense the enemy force's size and formation. A Juggernaut's cockpit was similar to a jet fighter's, filled with a multitude of switches, LCD screens, and two control sticks to the left and right. The biggest difference was that instead of a bulletproof glass windshield, the Juggernaut's cockpit was enclosed by an armored canopy, so the pilot couldn't see outside the unit. To compensate for that, the cockpit was equipped with three screens and a holo-window that provided all sorts of data, but those did little to elevate the cockpit's dark, claustrophobic feel.

The enemy unit employed a textbook diamond formation, as they had expected—a typical offensive formation, with the scouting party taking the rear while the other four parties each formed a vertex. Though the Legion had them outnumbered and outmatched in terms of performance, their tactics were simple and easy to predict.

Numerical superiority losing to strategic maneuvering was an elementary concept...but that logic didn't hold up so easily against this enemy. This was an army with a size that did the name *Legion* justice. And yet, this was business as usual for the Processors. Situations like these, where a small force had to beat the odds and defeat an overwhelmingly larger army, situations that would be seen as reckless and futile from the very beginning, were the kinds of battles the Eighty-Six regularly fought through.

Suddenly, a passage from the Bible someone had read to him in the past surfaced from the depths of his memory. *Someone*. The last time he'd seen and heard that person was painted over in his memories, so he couldn't quite remember. All he remembered were the words:

—And He asked him, *What is your name?*

Hearing what Shin whispered through the Para-RAID, which caught even the slightest of noises, Raiden sat up in his cockpit, having thrown his legs over the console earlier. Since he was hiding in the rubble, his main screen was dyed over by the concrete's gray, and his radar screen was set to passive. Since it wasn't in his mother tongue, the Republic's language, he didn't understand what Shin had said. *Dicit ei Legio nomen mihi—*

That was all he could make out.

Theo spoke up with an irritated tone.

"Shin, did you just quote the Bible? That's creepy, dude. And that's, like, the worst possible quote you could have picked, too."

"What did he say?"

“The messiah, like, asked the devil or a demon for his name, and the answer he got was ‘I am Legion, for we are many.’”

Raiden fell silent. Definitely the wrong thing to say in this situation.

It was then that someone else synced into the Para-RAID.

“Handler One to all units. I’m sorry for being late—I got delayed.”

A lovely voice, ringing like a silver bell, reached his ears through the Sensory Resonance. It was the new Handler who got assigned to them after the old one quit because he feared the Reaper. Judging from the voice, it was a girl roughly their age.

“The enemy forces are approaching. We should intercept them at point 208—”

“Undertaker to Handler One. We have the enemy’s position confirmed. We’ve already deployed at point 204.”

Shin responded plainly, and Raiden could hear a gulp on the other side of the Resonance.

“That was fast... Good job, Undertaker.”

The Handler seemed genuinely impressed with Shin, but Raiden wasn’t surprised. Shin and the rest of this squadron’s Processors all had Personal Names. A Personal Name was a sort of title given to veterans. Most Processors used call signs that were a combination of their platoon’s name and a number during operations. Only veterans who had survived for a year through the horrors of the battlefield and conquered that 0.01 survival rate received that title.

They were those who had the talent and character the majority of Processors lacked, and most importantly of all, they possessed the devil’s luck that allowed them to survive and refine those qualities. The monsters blessed by the devil or the Reaper. The kind of people who never died or even seemed capable of doing so. Those who had returned from death’s door time and time again, overcoming impossible odds without batting an eye, only ever sparing a passing glance for their myriad fallen comrades.

A Personal Name symbolized the respect and awe the other Processors felt for these veterans. The minimal respect they could offer to the heroes who reached the peaks others never could—and awe for those demons of war who could fight while stepping over the remains of both their comrades and their foes. All members of the Spearhead squadron were distinguished Name Bearers with four to six years of combat experience, making them the most seasoned and experienced of all Processors. They would do fine, even without this little princess to command them from her castle.

But at the same time, Raiden was a little impressed. Point 208 would be the optimal spot to station in if they were detected by the Legion. She’d specified that point despite being appointed to their squadron for only a week. It seemed there was more to this young lady than her good nature.

A warning alarm blared. Their legs’ oscillation sensors detected something. A holo-window popped up and zoomed in. Ahead lay a light slope at the end of the main street lined from the sides by wreckage. A black

silhouette suddenly covered the sunlight streaming down from the slope's peak, and the next moment, their view was filled with the color of steel.

They're here.

Their radar screens suddenly filled with red blips indicating hostile units. An army of mechanical demons marched toward them, threatening to paint over the ruins' gray with their color. The Legion marched in an orderly line, leaving gaps of fifty to one hundred meters between one another. The lightest units, the Scout-type Ameise, moved with a silence that betrayed their weight of over ten tons, the overlapping noise of their movement, like bones rubbing against one another, coalescing into what sounded like the rustling of leaves.

It was an otherworldly, awe-inspiring sight.

The complex sensors on the bottom of their torsos and the 7.56 mm antipersonnel machine guns on their shoulders swerved to and fro as they marched along, scuttling on their three pairs of legs. The Ameise had an angular form, reminiscent of a carnivorous fish.

Carrying a 57 mm anti-tank multiple-rocket launcher on its back, with light reflecting menacingly off the high-frequency blades protruding from its front legs, the Dragoon-type Grauwolf had the ferocious appearance of a six-legged shark.

With their fifty-ton tank frames carried on eight jointed legs, the Tank-type Löwe advanced proudly, their oppressive 120 mm smoothbore turrets gazing ahead.

The Electronic Disruption types—the Eintagsfliege that were deployed in the sky—cast a long shadow over the battlefield as their clouds blotted out the sun. They showered the ground with silver scalelike particles that resembled powdered snow, which regenerated the micromachines that served as both the Legion's lifeblood and their nervous system.

The Ameise platoon entered the kill zone. It drew near the first platoon that lay in ambush and passed them by without noticing. Led by their vanguard, the rest of the units passed them one by one, until eventually the Löwe, who stood at the rear, had entered the encirclement—

And that was that. They had entered the cage.

"Open fire."

At Shin's order, all units fixed their sights on the targets they'd been appointed and pulled the trigger.

The fourth platoon began gunning down the vanguard, while the first platoon bombarded the back line. The Ameise's relatively frail armor and the Löwe's lightly guarded rears were shot clean through, and the units collapsed, still and unmoving. The other Juggernauts opened fire, piercing through the Legion's remaining forces, which immediately shifted to battle positions.

Explosions and thunderous blasts rocked the battlefield.

Pieces of scrap metal and silver micromachine blood sprayed into the air, with black flames consuming the background. And at that moment,

twenty-one Juggernauts withdrew from their positions. Some left their covers and continued firing; others ran from cover to cover, unloading bullets from the flanks and rear onto the Legion that attempted to shoot down their escorts. By the time that ended, the first Juggernauts had already taken cover and begun shooting at the flanks of other Legion.

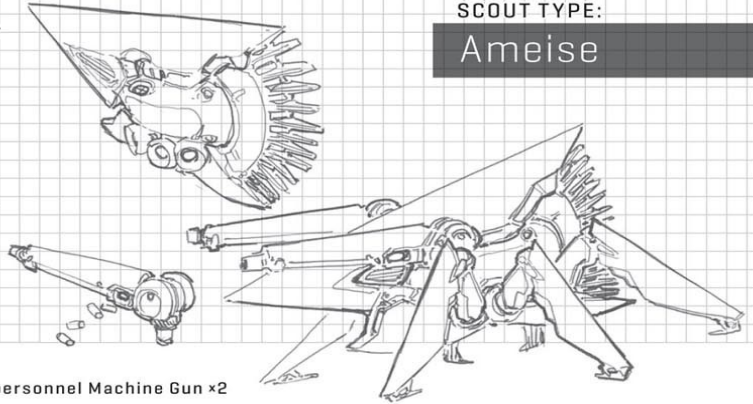
THE BASIC DRONES

The Legion's Basic Forces

Its name is derived from the word for *ant*. One of the more common types of Legion. As their name implies, the Scout-type Ameise are in charge of scouting and reconnaissance for large units, such as the Tank-type Löwe, and for providing observation duties and target acquiring for the Long-Range Gunner-type Skorpion. They also serve as standard infantry on the front lines.

SCOUT TYPE:

Ameise



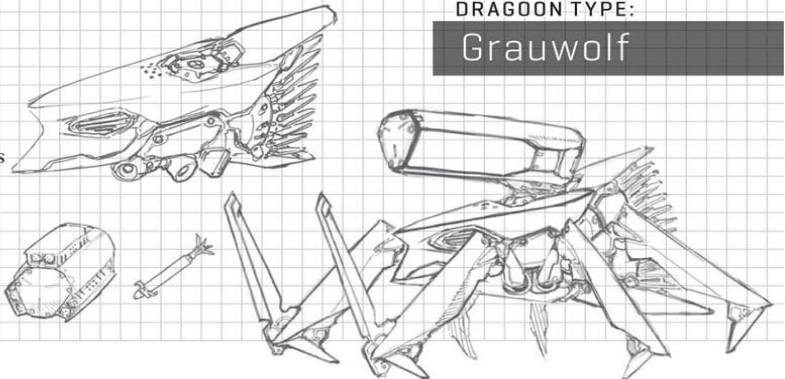
[ARMAMENTS]

Composite Sensor Unit x1 / 7.62 mm Antipersonnel Machine Gun x2

Its name is derived from the word for *wolf*. Its most striking features are the proximity blades attached to its forelegs, allowing it to tear through opponents like a carnivorous beast as it moves swiftly. Its back-mounted rocket launcher also carries considerable destructive power. However, its design sacrifices heavy armor in favor of mobility.

DRAGOON TYPE:

Grauwolf



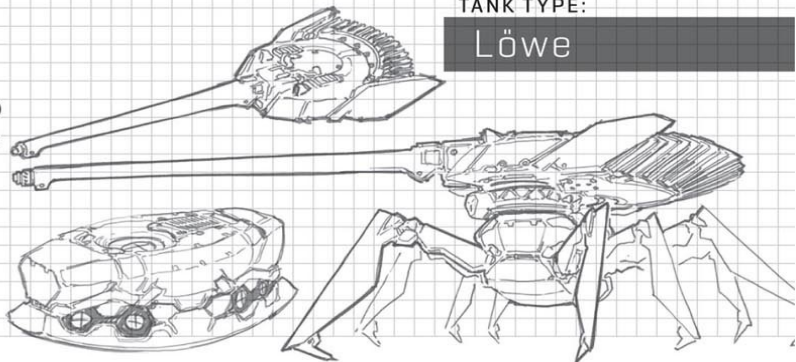
[ARMAMENTS]

Foreleg-Mounted Anti-Armor High-Frequency Blades x2 / Back-Mounted Multiple Anti-Tank Rocket Launcher x1

Its name is derived from the word for *lion*, due to its overwhelming firepower. On its upper half is a 120 mm turret (more than twice the size of the Juggernaut's 57 mm main armament). Its armor is extremely thick, and due to its massive frame, its basic strategy is to lure enemies into crowded places such as forests.

TANK TYPE:

Löwe



[ARMAMENTS]

Mounted 120 mm Cannon Turret

[mechanical design] I-IV

Juggernauts were hopeless, poorly constructed combat machines. Their flimsy armor was made from an aluminum alloy that was easily penetrated by machine-gun fire, their maneuverability was only slightly superior to that of a treadmill tank, and their main batteries were far too weak to contend with the Löwe. There either wasn't enough time or wasn't enough technological know-how to properly develop a cruise-control program for the Juggernaut's fragile quadruped legs (as cruise-control programs required more complex programming the more legs they had). But either way, the ground pressure on the legs was extremely significant. This made the Juggernauts on the eastern front, which was abundant with wetlands and soft ground, trip often.

No one could expect, even in their wildest dreams, to see these machines hop or roll around, let alone fly like the giant robots one saw in movies and cartoons. If the Juggernaut had any comparison, the Processors, wearing crooked smiles all the while, would say it was akin to a moving coffin.

The lightly armed Juggernaut, even if it could face the Ameise in battle, had no hope of beating the Grauwolf or the Löwe head-on. The Processors' common strategy was to engage them with multiple units and, by taking advantage of terrain and cover, shoot them through their weak points or in their vulnerable backs. These were the tactics handed down to them by their predecessors—the Eighty-Six who'd died on this land—and developed over many battles and countless sacrifices.

The Spearhead squadron had fought in accordance with these tactics for years and had grown accustomed to them by now. They had fundamentally no need for communications within the platoons, as each unit carried out its procedures without conflicting with its comrades.

And besides... Raiden's lips curled into a brazen smile.

They had the Reaper protecting them.

A Juggernaut bearing the Personal Mark of a headless skeleton—Undertaker—ran along the shadows of the ruins of a collapsed building, evading the enemies' lines of fire but never allowing them out of its sights. He gunned the Legion down skillfully, downing Scout types and Dragoon types, at times even circling around the Tank types and firing at their vulnerable weak points, while also drawing out their escorts and downing them.

Disrupting the enemy forces' coordination was Shin's job. Serving a vanguard role, he was a point man who was exceptionally skilled in close-quarters combat even among other vanguard. This was both his role within the squadron and the fighting style he was most proficient in. Just as his title implied, he was a reaper who decided who among his foes died first.

As he rushed through the battlefield, his cold gaze, which marked targets for certain death, suddenly wavered. *Ah, you won't come out this time, either, will you?* That meaningless, momentary thought was swallowed

by the black smoke of his rifle as he pulled the trigger again. As he locked his cold gaze on his next target, he instructed his escorts scattered throughout the city on how to most efficiently slaughter the enemy.

“—Third platoon. Aggravate the platoons you’re fighting and retreat southeast. Fifth platoon, stay where you are. Open fire as the enemy forces enter the kill zone and take them out.”

“Black Dog (Daiya), roger that... Snow Witch (Anju), if you’re gonna reload, do it right now.”

“Laughing Fox (Theo) here. I’m reloading, too. Don’t go shooting in this direction, Black Dog!”

“Falke (Haruto). Direction 270, distance 400. Hostiles are coming through the buildings and heading here.”

“Roooooger that. Fafnir (Kino), give me a hand.”

The sound of gunshots from afar shook the rubble. A group of Grauwolf types attempted to ambush them with an astounding technique—running vertically along the building walls—but they were reduced to scrap by machine-gun fire just as they attempted to lunge at the Juggernauts.

Shin looked around, attempting to identify his next target, but his gaze suddenly shifted as he noticed something.

“All units, cease fire and spread out.”

It was a sudden order, but all the units followed it unflinchingly. No one asked the stupid question of why. Because there was one more type of Legion, one that would rear its ugly head whenever other Legion had their backs against the wall—

A high-pitched, shrill screech filled the air, followed by artillery shells, apparently launched from a great distance, which began landing and bursting across the battlefield. Charred-black soil swelled up and burst. It was artillery support from the 155 mm self-propelled shell-cannon-type Legion, the Long-Range Gunner-type Skorpion.

Shin’s support computer reverse calculated the shells’ trajectories and specified the firing position to be thirty kilometers east-northeast from their current position. This was useless information, though, as they didn’t have any long-range ordnance available to them. The enemy had Long-Range Observer Units spread out to pinpoint where its rounds fell, but they would have to discern where they were among all the enemies on the field and from how the enemy units were spread out—

“Handler One to all units. Transmitting the Long-Range Observer Units’ coordinates right now. There are three potential targets. Please confirm and eliminate them.”

Shin lifted his gaze, noting three points lighting up on his digital map. Comparing it with the enemy positions he had perceived, he gave his orders to the marksman hiding in the buildings nearby.

“Gunslinger (Kurena), four units in direction 030, distance 1200.”

“Roger. On it.”

"Handler One, using directional lasers to transfer data runs the risk of exposing our position. Transfer all information during operations orally only."

"Ah... I'm sorry."

"The next Observer Unit should be coming out soon. We're counting on you to pinpoint it."

He could sense a smile blossoming on her face from the other side of the Resonance.

"Of course!"

He knit his brows at the cheer in the Handler girl's voice—but hearing the proximity alert wail amid the jumble of shouts, Shin shifted his attention back to the battlefield.

Unmindful of his own forces' losses—a tactic he could employ only in a battle against true drones—Raiden rushed through the battlefield, evading bombardment as he sought his next target. The fire lines that dotted the battlefield were still mainly those of the enemy. Getting hit by a single machine-gun bullet would mean a fatal injury, and all it would take was one tank shell to blow him to smithereens. Sneaking through the ruins as he rushed from one cover to the next, he discovered that someone had already beaten him to this spot.

It was Undertaker. Having run out of ammo, he was being restocked by a Scavenger—Fido, of course.

"Are you really gonna need this much ammo?"

"Like shooting fish in a barrel, right? May as well have fun while we're at it."

Apparently, he had heard his exchange with Theo. What a wiseass.

"...But there are definitely more Tank types than I thought. They must have regrouped with them while they were restocking."

He'd spoken as if this were as simple as forgetting your umbrella at home on a rainy day. Raiden couldn't remember ever seeing Shin lose his composure. This guy probably wouldn't change his expression even at the hour of his own death and would stay that way even after.

"Having so few places to take cover is becoming a problem. They'll analyze our movement patterns at this rate. We have to whittle them down before that happens."

Fido's crane arm finished exchanging the last magazine in the container. Restock complete. Undertaker rose to his feet.

"I'll handle the Löwe. I'll leave everyone else and give command over the support to you."

"Roger that. Undertaker... Ol' Aldrecht's gonna give you hell again."

He could sense a faint smile on the other side.

Undertaker leaped out of the ruins. Skillfully maneuvering between lines of fire, the Juggernaut rushed at a group of four Tank types at maximum speed. It was an act that went beyond just reckless, a rush anyone would deem as nothing more than suicide. The Handler girl cried out in what was probably a scream of terror.

"Undertaker?! What are you—?"

One of the Löwe shifted its turret's bearing and fired. Undertaker swung his unit nimbly to the side, successfully avoiding the shell. Another shot. Another miss. One bombardment, and another, and another, and another—

Slipping through a barrage of 120 mm shells capable of reducing both man and weapon to dust, Undertaker continued closing in on the Löwe. This wasn't a feat he would be able to perform by merely looking at the turret's bearing. Relying on nothing more than intuition cultivated by experience, the headless skeleton crept toward it using this nightmarishly difficult maneuver. The Tank type shifted its entire frame toward him, as if losing its temper. It rushed him with explosive speed, its eight legs—lethal weapons in their own rights—kicking up the earth in their wake.

There was no sound to its footsteps as it dashed forward with the massive weight of its steel frame behind him. Going from a state of stasis straight to maximum speed in an instant, the Löwe pressed on Undertaker in the blink of an eye. It was the absurd, unfair mobility granted by powerful shock absorbers and linear accelerators. Eight mechanical legs pressed against the earth and sprang forward. It intended to crush him. Right now—

In the next moment, Undertaker was airborne.

Leaping horizontally, he dodged the Löwe's attack. Changing his bearing in midair, he leaped up again as soon as he landed. Clinging to the Legion's frame, Undertaker used the Löwe's legs' joints to gain footing as he rapidly scuttled up to the top of the turret. Spreading its legs in an extreme posture that caused it to lurch forward, Undertaker thrust his gun-mounted arm at the turret's steel-blue armor. Aiming at the point where the Löwe's armor was the thinnest—the top of the turret—

Undertaker fired.

A high-speed anti-armor explosive round, designed to travel eight thousand meters per second, that had its minimal-detonation-range setting disabled penetrated the armor, reducing the Löwe's interior to ash with a fiery blast. By the time he had leaped from the smoking, crumbling remains of the Löwe, Undertaker had already set his sights on another target. Slipping through the barrage of bullets fired his way by the other Löwe's coaxial machine gun in short leaps, Undertaker retracted one of his legs and slashed with his grappling arm—

One of the grappling arm's available weapons was a high-frequency blade. No one but Shin would use it, however, since despite how powerful it was, its range was far too small to be effective. The second Tank type collapsed, and Shin pumped another shell into its vulnerable turret.

Using the downed unit as a shield, Shin blocked a shot from a third Löwe. Taking advantage of the moment the flames blocked the Tank type's sensors, Shin fired his wire anchor at the roof of a nearby structure, using it to rapidly ascend. He then landed on the third unit's turret as it desperately swerved to and fro, searching for its lost target, and shot it down point-blank.

“...”

Raiden could feel the Handler was shocked beyond words on the other side of the Resonance. If whoever had developed this aluminum coffin were to see this, he'd no doubt faint from sheer shock. Raiden squinted at the sight of this superhuman feat. The Juggernaut was never built for this kind of fighting style. It was a rush job lacking mobility, armor, and firepower and was planned to be a suicide weapon that could just barely shoot, at best. A single unit beating a Tank class—let alone several in succession—was inconceivable.

But of course, the price for such maneuvering was steep. Pushing a Juggernaut, which was brittle even at the best of times, to the limits of its mobility meant that by the time the battle ended, it would have all but broken down. And while the Tank class served as the spear's edge of the Legion offensive, there were still other units escorting them, and they would swarm the downed Undertaker.

To that extent, it eased the load on Raiden and the others as they engaged everyone but the Tank-class units. But even if it did ultimately hasten the battle's end, it was still honestly nothing short of a miracle that Undertaker hadn't died yet. But he was the sort of monster who'd survived for five years by fighting with these methods.

Raiden always thought that Shin was too good for this war.

He had fought alongside him for three years. For three years, Raiden had served as Shin's vice captain, meaning that for all this time, he was always his number two. But even though he was also a Name Bearer, Raiden could never hope to pull off these kinds of stunts. He could never stand on equal footing with him. This headless Reaper was, without any exaggeration, a hero of unmatched talent when it came to battle. He didn't just have the devil's luck when it came to surviving, though. With enough time and the right equipment, he could no doubt be the key to annihilating every last Legion off the face of the continent. That was simply how unparalleled his ability was.

But while he was lucky when it came to surviving conflict, he had rotten luck in other places. He had the misfortune of being born into the wrong era and during the worst possible bloody war. Had he been born in the distant past, in the age of knights, he would no doubt have ended up being the protagonist of some myth that would have been sung of by later generations, and his life would have ended with a hero's death on a battlefield where humans fought other humans. But such a dream was merely that: a dream.

Their fate was to die in an unknown corner of a battlefield, discarded like tools that had been used up, stripped of their rights and human dignity, without a grave to rest in or a name, or an honor to etch onto their nonexistent tombstones. Just like their millions of brethren who'd died on the battlefield, the most they could do was entrust their skeletons to one another.

The fog of Eintagsfliege cleared, and sunlight shone down on them once again. The remaining Legion began retreating, assisted by the cover of the Skorpion types' bombardment. These cold, heartless autonomous weapons never went mad with vengeance, no matter how many of their comrades were destroyed. Once their casualties passed a certain threshold, they merely concluded that their objective could not be achieved and swiftly ceased all hostilities in order to retreat as quickly as possible.

The setting sun's rays accentuated the silhouette of Undertaker, who stood among the wreckage of the Löwe. It was a beautiful, awe-inspiring sight, like the moonlight reflecting off the edge of an old sword.

On days when one didn't have to go on night assaults or do night-patrol duty, the few hours between dinner and lights out were free time. Having finished tidying up after dinner, Anju made her way back from pouring everyone coffee, only to find them holding a sharpshooting tournament in front of the hangar.

"That's one shot on King Bear and two shots on Sir Rabbit! Haruto's total score is seven points!"

"Aaah, I missed two shots, dammit! Man, using handguns just doesn't feel right..."

"Whoa there, we've got Fido coming in with a challenge! How will Kino's skills fare in comparison?!"

"C'mon, you can't be serious... Ugh! I can't catch a break! Next! Next person!"

"Oh, it's my turn? Hmm... Kaie Taniya, rising to the challenge!"

"Right, that's two points!"

"Whoa, that's all five shots dead center. Not bad, Raiden."

"Oof, there's no way. That's crazy."

"You cheeky little...! C'mon, Kurena! Show them the miracle of a real sharpshooter!"

"Okay, I'm gonna blow you guys away. Fido, don't just line them up. Throw 'em!"

""""Whoooooooooaaa!""""

"Damn, Fido's feeling sadistic today. Now it's putting them in a tower shape. Cranking up the difficulty, huh?"

"C'mon. It's your turn, Shin."

"Mm."

"...Holy crap. He just cleared it in one try! It's almost no fun when you keep doing that every time."

Using the empty cans from that day's cooking duty as targets, they all fired with their personal guns. Instead of targets, Theo scribbled cute animals on the cans with a marker, and Fido picked up the fallen cans and reorganized them in the shape of a tower or a pyramid. Watching that boisterous sight, Anju smiled warmly.

It was a lavish dinner. They grilled the wild boar they'd caught and served it with gooseberry sauce gathered in hoards from the forest. There

was also a side salad made from vegetables from the back garden and a creamy soup concocted from canned milk and mushrooms. It was a bit too lavish to eat in the dining room, so they carried a table outside, and since the people on cooking duty wouldn't be able to handle it on their own, everyone pitched in to help.

It was fun, and it was because they all did it together. Seeing everyone like this made her happy.

Not even bothering to check whether he hit the empty cans, Shin distanced himself from the commotion and began flipping through a book. Anju placed a mug of coffee in front of him.

"Great job today."

His only response was to briefly glance at her before returning his eyes to the book. Leaving the tray full of coffee mugs with Daiya, who had noticed them and approached her, Anju pulled out a chair opposite Shin and sat down. She peeked at the thick book Shin was reading and smiled at the lovely sight of the white-socked black kitten they kept in the barracks toying with the pages.

"Is it interesting?"

"Not particularly."

Perhaps realizing his answer was probably too curt, Shin paused and then opened his mouth to speak again.

"Focusing on something makes it so I don't hear it as loudly."

"...I see," Anju said, a pained smile on her lips.

This was the one thing they couldn't comfort him through.

"Thank you. You always—"

Suddenly, an illusory heat tingled from her RAID Device.

"Handler One to all units. Are you free right now?"

The Handler girl's voice rang out. Ever since her appointment a week ago, she'd diligently chimed in every night after dinner for a short exchange.

"No problems on our side, Handler One. Good job today."

Shin answered on everyone's behalf. Peculiarly enough, the kitten had tried batting the pages just as Shin was trying to read, so he'd lifted the book up with the cat dangling from it. Everyone else, all of whom had been partying a moment earlier, hurriedly removed the bullets from their handguns and placed them in their holsters. The Eighty-Six weren't allowed to carry small firearms, for the sake of preventing an insurrection. There were never any inspections, and just about every squadron had procured them from nearby abandoned villages and military installations.

"Yes, amazing job on your side as well, Undertaker... Were you playing some kind of game? Pardon me if I interrupted you."

"We were just killing time. There's no need to worry about it."

Anyone who didn't want to participate in these talks was free to cut the connection, as the Handler told them on her first day. Shin spoke as he watched several of the squad mates immediately cut the connection and

boldly return to a knife-throwing contest. Raiden, Theo, Kaie, and a few others sat down next to him, sipping coffee from their mugs.

"Are you sure? It sounded like you were having fun...over there."

They could feel the Handler sit up in her chair, invoking the feeling that she was looking straight at them.

"Undertaker, I have a few complaints for you today."

It felt more like a diligent class president's rebuke than a commanding officer's dressing down. Shin continued sipping his coffee, undisturbed, showing that he didn't take anything the Handler from the other side of the wall had to say particularly seriously.

"About what?"

"The platoon's battle logs. You sending me the wrong ones wasn't a mistake. When I tried reading through them...they were all the same report."

Shin raised his eyes slightly.

"Wait, are you saying you went through all of them?"

"All the ones since you were appointed Spearhead's captain."

"...The hell? You were still doing that?"

Shin ignored the surprised reaction of Raiden, who was unable to contain his astonishment.

"I don't know what you hope to gain from knowing what happens on the field. These reports seem pointless to me."

"Analyzing the Legion's tactics and formations is a Handler's job."

Having said this curtly, the Handler softened her tone.

"I understand you neglected to send them since no one was bothering to read them. That was negligence on our part, so I do not count this against you. But please submit them properly from here on out, because I will be reading them."

What a bother. Shin opened his mouth to speak with that thought on his mind.

"I can't write or read very well."

"The balls on you, I swear..."

Ignoring Daiya's whisper, Shin returned to flipping through the book's pages. The Handler, of course, didn't know that since she wasn't there. Embarrassment mixed into her voice as she realized that many Processors placed in the internment camps at a young age never got a proper education.

"O-oh, I'm sorry... But in that case, it's even more important that you get yourself used to writing. Think of the reports as practice. I'm sure it'll help you."

"Will it, now?"

"..."

The Handler was clearly dejected. Theo snorted, as if to say that he could read if nothing else, and threw the knife he held, knocking down a can bearing a drawing of a cute piggy princess. Kaie tilted her head quizzically, still holding her mug in both hands.

"But it is useful to you, Undertaker. Your hobby is reading, after all. Isn't that thing you're reading now a philosophy book? It looks really complicated to me."

A heavy silence hung on the other side of the Resonance.

"Undertaker?"

Her words were as soft-spoken as earlier, and there was probably even a smile on her face, but there was a strange sort of pressure to her voice.

".....Fine, I understand."

"Please send me reports on all your patrols so far, okay? And the combat reports, too. All of them."

"...Will the mission recorder's data files do?"

"No. Handwritten reports, please."

Shin clicked his tongue. Kaie, who had peeked in on what was going on, gasped in surprise, her ponytail jolting up. She brought her hands together and bowed her head in apology, but Shin waved his head as if to say she hadn't forced him to do it.

The Handler sighed with a "Good grief" and then suddenly remembered why she still hadn't finished the transmission. Holding back her anger, she continued earnestly.

"If we analyze operational data, we may be able to come up with countermeasures against the Legion. And your data is even more important, because you're seasoned veterans. It would lower the rate of casualties across all fronts and help you, too, so please do cooperate with me on this matter."

"..."

Shin said nothing, and the Handler girl fell sadly silent. She then spoke up cheerily, attempting to break the strained atmosphere.

"By the way, the dates on those documents were pretty old. Did you receive them from someone? Or have you been sending them since back then?"

"Yeah, this doofus has been sending these phony reports since way back when, Handler One. He's been doing that since before I met him."

Raiden joined in on the conversation teasingly. They could feel the Handler blink with a puzzled expression.

"Were you acquainted with Undertaker before you joined this squadron, Wehrwolf?"

Kaie shrugged her shoulders.

"Most of us are like that. Black Dog (Daiya) and Snow Witch (Anju) have been in the same unit since enlisting, and I joined the same year as Falke (Haruto). Laughing Fox (Theo) and Gunslinger (Kurena) were in Undertaker's (Shin's) and Wehrwolf's (Raiden's) unit for two years... And I think you two met two years ago, too?"

"Three years."

Raiden answered, and the Handler fell silent for a moment.

"How long has it been since you were drafted?"

"Four years for all of us, I think. Oh, Undertaker's been here the longest. Five years."

Cheer mingled into the Handler's voice once more.

"In that case, you've almost completed your service, Undertaker. Have you put any thought into what you'll do once you're discharged? Anywhere you'd like to go? Anything you'd like to see?"

Everyone's gaze fixed on Shin. Still not lifting his eyes from the page, he replied curtly.

"Not really. I never thought about it too much."

"O-oh, I see... But I think you should start putting some thought into it. You might find something you want to do. I think that would be nice."

Shin smiled weakly. The kitten, who was dozing on his lap, twitched its ears and looked up at him.

"Yes, maybe it would."

CHAPTER 3

TO YOUR GALLANT VISAGE AT THE UNDERWORLD'S EDGE

Half a month had passed since Lena was appointed to the Spearhead squadron.

There were no casualties during that day's deployment, either, and as had become her daily routine, Lena activated the Para-RAID in a relaxed fashion, Resonating with the Processors.

It was after dinner in Lena's room. For the past half month, the Spearhead squadron had had zero casualties, despite deploying far more often than most squadrons. That was probably because they truly were an elite unit, made up of seasoned veterans.

"Good evening, units. You all did a great job today, as usual."

The first thing she could hear was faint noise in the background, weak enough that it would die out should anyone speak to her. It was probably the distant noise of the hangar or the sound of fighting from other Sectors.

"Good evening, Handler One, and good job today."

The first to answer her was Undertaker, as always. His voice was serene and collected, and in the end, Lena couldn't find even a sliver of the reason why he'd come to be called by such an ominous alias.

There were several other presences on the other side of the Resonance, and gradually, several more of the squad members proceeded to greet Lena. Wehrwolf the vice captain, the somewhat foulmouthed but well-regarded older-brother figure of the squad. The honest and steadfast Kirschblüte, who would go along with any silly topic that came up in conversation. Laughing Fox, whose kind, effeminate voice stood in contrast to his sharp tongue.

True to his first impression, Undertaker was the taciturn sort and didn't participate much in conversations outside of official duties, but apparently, everyone was always around him when Lena Resonated with them. There were a few squad members who didn't connect to the conversation. *They must all like Undertaker very much.*

"Undertaker. I would like to start with the matter of the delivery date for the supply shipment you requested the other day..."

Listening to the Handler and Shin continue their businesslike exchange, Raiden spent the evening solving a crossword puzzle in a magazine he had

picked up. They were in Shin's room at the dormitory of their worn-out barracks.

Around him were a few others who had made this their gathering place, whiling away the hours, each in their own way. Theo was engrossed in sketching. Haruto, Kurena, and Kaie were playing a card game. Anju was knitting a sweater with some kind of elaborate pattern while Daiya was trying to fix a broken radio. Others were congregating in their rooms or the dining hall, and their chipper voices could be heard from the distance.

As captain, Shin had duties involving reports and other paperwork, so he was given the largest room in the barracks, which also doubled as an office. Raiden would go there to consult him regarding matters involving the squad, and their friends would gradually peek in to pester them. The room had become one of everyone's usual haunts before long.

Shin, being the room's owner, didn't seem to mind so long as he had a place to read. He would remain silent and detached even if people were tending to the cat, quarreling noisily over who won a game of chess, or even belly dancing in front of him (Daiya and Kujo actually had once). Right now, he was (as always) in his room. He was reading a novel—which he'd found in an abandoned library somewhere—while speaking to the Handler. He was lying on the old pipe bed occupying the corner and using its pillow as a cushion. The white-socked black kitten lay sprawled out on his chest, as it did every night.

Looking at this peaceful sight, he took a sip from his coffee mug. It was a blend made from a recipe passed down for generations among the Processors, the Spearhead squadron's traditional Ersatz Café. It was made from dandelions they grew behind the barracks, making it far tastier than the mysterious black muddy water one would get from synthetic black coffee powder.

...What would the old hag say if I let her taste this? The damn crone was a stubborn stick in the mud who wouldn't accept any kind of luxury, but coffee was the one thing she was fond of.

Even the production plants in the eighty-five Sectors didn't do a much better job than the ones in the bases and internment camps when it came to reproducing grocery items. The hag would complain every single morning that the coffee tasted like mud. *Is she still grumbling about it, even now? Is she still lamenting what happened to us...?*

As if to drown out the Handler's chime-like voice, the kitten gave a high-pitched meow.

Lena blinked in surprise, hearing a shrill meow cut into her words.

"Was that a...cat...just now?"

"Oh yeah. We keep it as a pet here in the barracks," Black Dog answered. "The one who picked it up was yours truly, by the way. The tiny thing kept meowing in front of a house that had its roof blown off by a tank shell. Its parents and siblings all got squished, but it survived somehow."

"And for some reason, Undertaker was the one it got attached to."

"Undertaker won't even play with him. It keeps rubbing up on him and begging for attention, but he won't give it the time of day."

"I'm not sure if it actually likes him or just thinks of him as a good bed. I mean, look at it now."

"Yeah, it's probably 'cause Undertaker never budes an inch when he's reading. Which means he'd never cling to Black Dog like that, since he's always loud."

"Wow, rude! And unreasonable! I demand an apology!"

Hearing them argue and laugh like that brought a slight smile to Lena's lips. Anyone listening to them now would only hear perfectly normal boys and girls her age. It felt odd that they weren't here with her.

"What's the cat's name?" she asked fondly, and everyone Resonating with her answered at the same time.

"Blackie."

"Whitey."

"Calico."

"Chibi."

"Kitty."

"Remarque."

"For the hundredth time, stop naming it after whatever author you're reading at the moment! It's too random! Also, what the hell are you even reading? Get something decent, dammit."

That last name Laughing Fox added wasn't an actual name, it seemed. Lena was still confused, though.

"Are there really that many cats there...?"

"Didn't you hear the story? There's just the one."

That answer only left Lena more confused. Black Dog explained concisely:

"It's a black kitten, but its paws are white. That's why we call it Blackie, Whitey, and Calico. We don't actually have a set name for it, so we just call it whatever we feel like at the time. Recently, it learned to just come over if we look its way and say something."

So that's why.

"But why not just decide on a name?"

"...Hmm. Well, that's because—"

After a moment of hesitance, Black Dog seemed to have decided to answer. But the next moment, he cut the link.

Kurena suddenly sat up, as if kicking the chair away, and stormed out of the room. Daiya, who'd been sitting right next to her, went after Kurena. The chair slammed against the floor clamorously.

"...? Did something happen?"

Daiya had cut off his Resonance, and Kurena hadn't been connected to begin with. Shin spoke to keep up appearances.

"Yes, a rat appeared."

"A rat?!"

"That one's a bit too convincing."

Theo's whisper hadn't reached the Handler's ears. She asked whether they had rats often in the barracks... She was probably scared of them or something, because her voice was surprisingly timid. Giving her a half-hearted reply, Shin gazed at the ajar door Kurena had slammed on her way out.

In the middle of the hallway, Daiya caught up to Kurena, who was breathing in short, heavy breaths, as if trying to reduce the stress she'd accumulated over a long period. Just listening to that voice made her sick. It disgusted her so much, Kurena eventually couldn't take it anymore. That woman had stolen these peaceful little evenings they had all enjoyed together every day until now. They were such pleasant, precious times, and now...

"Kurena..."

"Why do they keep talking to her?"

"It's just for the time being. You know that little princess will stop connecting on her own soon."

Daiya shrugged with eyes so cold, it made his usual mischievousness seem like a lie. It would be the same as always. No Handler was ever able to tolerate being Resonated to the Reaper for long, after all. That girl didn't know the origin of Shin's other name yet. She was just fortunate enough to not have had those particular enemies show up yet, but that luck would run out sooner or later.

The heretical Black Sheep that hide among the flock of Legion. Or that was the inspiration behind the name, but by now, the Black Sheep far outnumbered the normal Legion. And even the Shepherd, who was far more dangerous, hadn't appeared yet, either.

Kurena ground her teeth. She knew that much; she really did, but still...

"Shin should just break her already." Anger and irritation overwhelming her, Kurena spat spiteful, stinging words. "What's the point of being this worried over one stinking white pig? They've got the sync rate set low, after all."

"Of course they do. Shin doesn't break the Handlers because he wants to, you know?"

To properly communicate over the tumultuous sounds of the battlefield, it was standard protocol to set the Para-RAID's sync rate to the absolute lowest so that only the speakers' voices could be heard.

Daiya spoke, not as a rebuke but anxiously.

"Besides, can you say that to Shin's face? 'I don't like that woman, so just break her.' Could you tell him to do that—to his face?"

"..."

Kurena bit her lip. Daiya was right. It was a horrible thing to say. Shin and everyone else, they were more than just her friends. They were her family. And there was no way she could say something that awful to family. To Shin, it became a routine, a part of his day-to-day life. But still...

"I'm sorry... But I just can't forgive her. They killed my mom and dad. They toyed with them like they were targets at a shooting range."

It had happened one night during an escort to an internment camp. The Alba soldiers had decided to test where they could hit the prisoners or how much they could endure before dying. They tortured her parents to death, laughing all the while. They sent Kurena's sister, who was seven years older, to the battlefield immediately after. She had been fourteen—just a year younger than Kurena was now. Her sister, who'd tried to drive away those scumbags, who'd tried to treat her parents' wounds as their blood dripped from her hands. And in the end, the ones who'd apologized to Kurena and her sister for failing to save their parents were Alba and Celena soldiers.

"The white pigs are all scum... I will never, ever forgive them."

When the two returned, the conversation had ricocheted from rats to stories about the landscape you could see only on the front lines until finally settling on the topic of a meteor shower Kaie saw once. Daiya gave a brief shrug at Raiden's inquisitive glance and returned to fixing the radio while Kurena sat down on the floor near Shin and picked up the kitten to play with it.

In truth, it probably didn't want to play that much, but the kitten had eventually obliged her calls, tottering away from Shin, who had changed his position to allow Kurena to sit next to him. It had plopped off the bed but kept its distance at first while wearing an indifferent expression, before Kurena finally scooped it up.

"—Really, Kirschblüte? Were there really that many shooting stars?"

"More than I could count. It was, I think, two years ago? I looked up, and before I knew it, a few stars were already falling. The whole sky was full of light... It was...such a sight."

Kirschblüte—Kaie—gave a nod as she began dealing cards in Kurena's stead. Raiden had seen that meteor shower, too, but at the time, they were all stuck in the middle of the battlefield, surrounded by the remains of enemies and allies alike. Shin was the only one next to him, and both their Juggernauts were out of energy. They had to wait for Fido to find them and couldn't budge an inch until it did. It certainly wasn't a beautiful, romantic night they could look back on and laugh about.

Without the artificial light humans brought, the battlefield was enveloped in total darkness at night, the kind of darkness the term *pitch-black* was made to describe. The landscape was dyed completely black, with the only light coming from the skies above, illuminated as if lit with pale-blue flames; a suffocating, solemn silence blanketed everything. It all produced the apocalyptic illusion that the world had been shattered to pieces and left to crumble, as if it had been set ablaze.

Raiden had thought, at the time, that perhaps dying wouldn't be so bad if that was the last thing he got to see, and admitting that to Shin was a disgrace he would never live down. Shin had actually scoffed at him. What a prick.

"I'll probably never see anything like it again... You get shooting stars every year, but it can take decades between meteor showers, and one with that many stars is probably once in a century... Oh, that's something Sirius (Kujo) told me before."

"That's a shame... I wish I could have seen it, too."

"Can't you see the stars over there?"

"The city lights are on all night long. We never see the stars at night here."

"Oh..." Kaie smiled faintly. How nostalgic. "Yeah, that's what it was like... It's pitch-black here at night. There are hardly any people, we're in the middle of nowhere, and they really do turn all the lights off at lights out. So we usually have a great view of the stars. You know how they say 'a starlit sky'? It's like that. That's probably one of the nicer things about living here."

"..."

The Handler fell silent at Kaie's words. She likely never expected to hear a Processor, who should be living in a hell on Earth, say they were glad to be where they were. She posed her next question with a meek, almost resolved sort of tone. It was a voice willing to receive all the condemnation and abuse they might throw at her, since it was her responsibility, after all.

"Kirschblüte... Do you...resent us?"

Kaie hesitated for a short moment.

"...Well obviously, being discriminated against doesn't feel too great, and it's really, really vexing. Life in the internment camps was terrible, and fighting is always scary. So I can't help but hate the people who forced this life on us while saying it's okay to treat us this way because Eighty-Six aren't even human."

Kaie continued, preventing the Handler from offering words of remorse or self-condemnation. She wouldn't accept a canned apology.

"But I do know that not all the Alba are bad people... Just like I know that not all the Eighty-Six are saints, either."

"Huh...?"

Kaie's lips curled up in a bitter smile.

"See, I'm an Orienta, so there were all sorts of problems in the internment camps and my old squadrons."

And it wasn't just Kaie. Anju had had issues in the past, too...and so had Shin, probably, though he was tight-lipped about it. Those who had Alba blood flowing through their veins or were descendants of the Empire—especially those of noble birth—were persecuted in the internment camps. That lineage was actually the primary reason for their internment. It was probably easy for everyone there to use them as an outlet for their frustrations, and the eastern and southern races were always the minority in the camps.

The Eighty-Six weren't all innocent victims. The world always sided against the few and turned its back on the weak.

"Anyway, we do know there are good Alba out there, too. I haven't seen it personally, but some of the others have. So I don't resent you just for being an Alba."

"I see... I should be grateful to those people, too, then."

Kaie sat up, bending her body forward. Even though they were talking via Para-RAID, she still found herself moving as if the Handler were sitting right in front of her.

"I've got a question for you, too. Why are you so interested in us?"

Suddenly, an image of flames appeared in Shin's mind, and he raised his eyes from his book. He'd never attended a bonfire or a burning at the stake, so it was likely one of the Handler's memories.

"A Processor just like all of you saved me once, in the past..."

Lena recalled that day.

"We are Republic citizens. We were born in this country and raised in this country."

"Even if no one acknowledges that anymore, that's exactly why we need to prove it. Protecting the motherland is a Republic citizen's duty and pride. That is why we fight."

"The words left behind by the person who saved me. I always wanted to answer those earnest words, and that's why I..."

"He said he was a Republic citizen and would fight to prove that. And I think we have to answer the words he left behind. Simply sending you to fight without even sparing you a passing glance, without ever trying to get to know you, would be going against that... It's unforgivable."

Raiden's eyes narrowed at those painfully beautiful words. Kaie listened and, after the Handler finished speaking, paused for thought before opening her mouth.

"Handler One... You're a real pure virgin, aren't you?"

"Pfft—?!"

They could hear the Handler spit out tea or some other beverage. Everyone Resonated burst out in laughter. Kurena and Haruto, who weren't Resonated, looked at everyone else with baffled expressions and started laughing, too, after Anju explained what had happened. The Handler girl was coughing, and Kaie, who was shocked at everyone's response, suddenly went pale.

"...Oh my God, I'm sorry! I got the words confused! I meant *maiden*! A real pure *maiden*!"

One normally wouldn't mix those two up, and the meaning wasn't that different anyway. Daiya and Haruto looked like they were just about to die laughing, beating heartily on the tables and walls (Kino shouted an angry "Knock it off, assholes!" from the other side of the wall), and even Shin was laughing, uncharacteristically, his shoulders shaking. Kaie, on the other hand, was gradually becoming more and more panicked.

"I meant, like, you know, the kind of girl who thinks the world's some wonderful field of flowers, who's got this perfect, unblemished ideal she's protecting and, like... What I'm trying to say is...!"

The Handler was obviously blushing and completely stiff.

"You're not a bad person, okay? So let me warn you right now," said Kaie, who had somehow calmed down. "You're not cut out for this job and definitely not someone who should interact with us. We're not fighting for that kind of noble reason, so you shouldn't get involved... You should switch with someone else. Before you regret it."

Kaie said she wasn't a bad person.

But she never said she was a good person.

At the time, Lena had no way of understanding why that was.

†

"Handler One to all units. We've detected the enemy on the radar."

On that day, the entire Spearhead squadron was out on a mission, and Lena was in the command room, speaking to them with her eyes locked on the screen.

"The bulk of the enemy offensive is a mixed force of Dragoon types and Tank types, with a company of Anti-Tank Artillery types (Stier) accompanying them—"

"We've confirmed their location, Handler One. We're preparing to intercept them at point 478."

She had intended to inform them of the enemy position and propose a strategy they should employ but, having been cut off in the middle, was left confused and muttered an acknowledgment.

The veteran Spearhead squadron didn't seem to need Lena's assistance very much, and recently, her role was mostly to support them so each member would be able to fully exhibit their talents and skills. She would analyze the enemy's movements or adjust resupplies so they would reach the right hands at the right time, and she spent her days poring over documents in the filing room for information regarding the squadron's appointed region.

Recently, she had been repeatedly appealing for permission to use the interception cannon at the back of the Sector. If she could use the artillery cannon, its range would allow her to at least somewhat suppress the Skorpion types' artillery assaults. It would make battles much easier, but the cannon was a throwaway model—once fired, it needed to be recalibrated and reset. The officers over at the Transport Division weren't willing to go to that sort of trouble for "a bunch of Eighty-Six," which meant Lena's requests were falling on deaf ears. They also said something along the lines of "Isn't it already all rusted up?"

Just as Lena was remembering that irritating exchange, Laughing Fox spoke.

"Undertaker. Gunslinger is in position."

"Laughing Fox to Undertaker, third squad, likewise in position."

Gradually, everyone had gotten into position. It was a perfect interception formation, set as if they knew the Legion's course. The Spearhead squadron's Processors always seemed to move as if they were predicting the Legion's actions. Maybe there was some kind of omen only they could see.

Lena thought she should ask about this once this fight was over. If they were able to implement this method in other squadrons, the mortality rate of Processors during raids should drop drastically. The way priceless information like this was used only in individual areas and never spread out to other squadrons was a huge flaw in this distorted system.

With those thoughts in mind, Lena spoke while examining the first ward's map she had finally found yesterday.

"Undertaker. Please have Gunslinger change her position. Post her at three o'clock, three hundred meters from her current location. If she hides there, she'll have the high ground. She'll be sniping from a ridge, and it should provide a much better field of vision."

After a moment's pause, Undertaker responded.

"We'll confirm its location... Gunslinger, can you see that point?"

"I'll check—give me ten seconds... Yeah, I can see it. Moving over there now."

"That position is in the opposite direction from the first squad, who'll be serving as vanguard. Considering Undertaker's strategy of causing a disturbance in the enemy forces before engaging units individually, this should create an opening that will deceive the enemy in the early phases of the operation."

Wehrwolf chuckled.

"So she'll be bait. For having such a pretty voice, you've got guts, princess."

"...The Tank and Anti-Tank Artillery types aren't good at changing angles of elevation. They shouldn't be able to shoot directly at Gunslinger once she's up there, and if they change their firing position, the surrounding terrain should serve as cover—"

"Don't get me wrong... It's a good plan. Ain't that right, Gunslinger?"

"I'll do anything if it means helping everyone."

She answered valiantly, but her voice became much colder when she addressed Lena directly:

"Did you find a new map or something? Must be convenient."

Lena smiled wryly. This girl, Gunslinger, didn't seem to like her. She would always disconnect during their daily briefings, and whenever they did talk, she always had a blatantly cold, blunt attitude.

The map Lena was holding had been made by the Republic's ground forces and was the highly detailed product of painstaking months of combat and reconnaissance. For some reason, it hadn't been shared with the frontline bases that desperately needed it. The Processors were currently relying on maps they'd found in the nearby ruins, to which they'd added

notes and amendments as they used them. Thanks to that, they knew the common interception points and attack routes but weren't as knowledgeable about the topography.

"Do you want me to transmit it over later?"

It had too much data to transfer during an engagement, when bandwidth was limited, but that wouldn't be an issue later, when they had time.

Wehrwolf chuckled derisively.

"Sure ya wanna do that? You'd be transmitting military secrets to us Eighty-Six, 'citizens of inimical character.'"

"I don't mind. What's the point of having this information if it's not being used?"

Those words seemed to take Wehrwolf by surprise. He gave a surprised "Huh" and fell silent. To begin with, it had been an unfiled, unmanaged document until Lena dug it out of a mountain of cardboard boxes. How confidential could it be if no one would even notice if she copied or misplaced it?

The Republic's ground forces and rear personnel had been driven off the battlefield and annihilated in the opening stages of the war nine years ago, and there was no actual succession of their operations and paperwork. As such, a great deal of their documentation had been orphaned, its whereabouts unknown and unmanaged. Any proper soldier would see how grave of a problem that was.

"Also, you are not Eighty-Six. If nothing else, I've never called you that —"

"Yeah, yeah... Tch. They're coming."

Lena could feel tension fill the other side of the Resonance. It even felt like some were excited for the battle to begin, probably stemming from their long service or the adrenaline rush of being on the battlefield.

The roar of a cannon, powerful enough to shake even the pit of her stomach, echoed in her ears from the other side of the Resonance.

The battle proceeded swiftly, and the red blips signifying the Legion were gradually disappearing from the map. The Spearhead squadron had cut through a primeval forest in the combat zone in order to detour around and decimate a group of high-firepower, low-mobility Stier. This would also allow them to draw the Ameise and Grauwolf types into the forest, where they could be separated and taken out individually. The dense forest had the added benefit of limiting the Löwe's maneuverability, as they were incapable of making tight turns. It greatly impacted their field of vision and range of attack as well.

Without enough room to maneuver, the Legion were forced to split into smaller groups and forfeit their numerical advantage. Looking at it from the side, it almost seemed as if the Processors were performing an operation they had long since gotten used to. However, in this kind of battlefield, that was simply impossible.

Evading a shell fired its way, a single Juggernaut—Kirschblüte—dived through the series and went into a dash, trying to aim at a Löwe's left flank.

A shudder ran through Lena. The Löwe's position was strange. Judging from the enemy's deployment, there shouldn't have been a Löwe there. The Legion were always vigilant, and in that formation, they wouldn't be able to provide cover for one another. Lena checked the area map in a panic and confirmed the enemy's advance. It was specified on the area map, but Kirschblüte probably couldn't see it; as far as she could tell, it was buried under something, hidden from sight—

"Get away from there, Kirschblüte!"

"Huh?"

Lena's warning came a moment too late. The blip marking Kirschblüte's unit on the radar screen unnaturally disappeared.

"What is this...?! A marsh?!"

Stuck in her now immobile unit, Kaie shook her head and groaned despairingly. Through the screen, she saw her Juggernaut's front legs were submerged halfway into the ground. What had looked like a piece of grassland turned out to be a marsh, the kind of soft terrain the badly balanced Juggernaut was the least capable of traversing.

She would have to walk backward to get out. Having reached that conclusion, she gripped the two sticks—

"Kirschblüte, get away from there right now!"

Shin's warning made Kaie raise her head. Lifting Kirschblüte's optical sensor, Kaie saw a Löwe standing right in front of her.

"...Ah."

She was inside the tank turret's minimum range, so the Löwe instead brandished its front legs. It did so coldly, with the ruthlessness of clockwork that would never stop revolving, no matter how much the person trapped between its gears screamed or begged.

"No..."

It was a weak, faint plea, like a child on the verge of tears.

"I don't want to die..."

The Löwe moaned as it swung its legs. Fifty tons traveling at high speed decapitated Kirschblüte with a sweeping blow. The Processors had taken to grimly nicknaming the clamshell-type canopy as the Guillotine, since it was badly connected and tended to snap and fly away—along with its pilot—if it took a strong enough impact. And true to that terrible name, Kirschblüte's canopy disengaged from the rest of the unit.

Another round object flew off in the opposite direction, tumbling down into the ground and rolling away, never to be seen again...

After a moment of horrified silence, bellows and shouts of sorrow and indignation filled the Resonance.

"Kirschblüte...?! — God dammit!!!"

"Undertaker, I'm going to collect her. Buy me a minute—we can't leave her there!"

Shin's reply was nothing but silence, like a frozen lake in a midwinter night.

"Don't, Snow Witch... They're using her body as a decoy. It's an ambush."

The Löwe that killed Kaie was still lurking somewhere nearby, waiting to down any enemies intent on retrieving an injured comrade or a corpse. It was originally an established sniper tactic. He could hear Anju's anguished breathing and a heavy thud as she hit the console in a rage. At the very least, Snow Witch fired a 57 mm explosive shell that enveloped Kirschblüte and its surroundings in flame.

"Kirschblüte, KIA. Fafnir (Kino), go cover for the fourth squad... There aren't many remaining enemies. Let's finish this before they can take advantage of Kirschblüte's loss."

"Roger."

The responses, however saddened or enraged, came with the calmness of veterans who had seen their comrades being blown away countless times. It was because they were experienced Name Bearers that the sight of a friendly unit's blip suddenly becoming a Signal Lost had grown so sickeningly familiar.

They knew all too well that they had to suppress their grief until the battle was over. Otherwise, they'd only join their companions as corpses. Their experience allowed them to detach from their emotions and maintain the coolheadedness they needed to survive. It was the consciousness of humans who had adapted to the madness of the battlefield and degraded into cold, calculated killing machines.

With only a moment's pause—a single, bitter intake of breath—the swarm of quadruped mechanical spiders resumed their clamorous scurry into the shade of the trees. And like the shambling skeletons of the dead lying in wait under the dimly lit entrance at the underworld's edge, they wandered about, seeking anyone they could sink their claws into—anyone to strangle and drag down to the same place their fallen companion had gone. Shortly after, the Legion forces were eradicated. Not forced to retreat, but quite literally eradicated. Feeling that this was the will of the remaining Processors, Lena's heart filled with sorrow.

It had only been the other day, just the other day, that Kirschblüte had told her about the meteor shower. As Lena remembered Kirschblüte's prideful words, regret and grief pressed against her heart. If only she'd found this map sooner. If only she'd warned her in time...

"Situation resolved—good work, everyone."

"..."

No one answered her. They were probably all grieving in their own ways.

"About Kirschblüte... I'm—I'm so sorry. If only I'd been more—"

That moment.

She could feel a deep, terrifying silence radiating from the other side of the Resonance.

"You're sorry?"

Laughing Fox answered, as if repressing something on the verge of exploding, something creaking behind his otherwise calm voice.

"You? Sorry? What are you sorry for? An Eighty-Six or two might die for all you care, but at the end of the day, you still go home, have your dinner, and go to sleep all safe and sound, right? Stop spouting bullshit with that meek little voice of yours."

It took Lena a moment to properly process what she'd just heard. Noticing Lena couldn't think of anything to say on the spot, Laughing Fox muttered a "Listen here, you..." before continuing. This time, he made no attempt to mask his hostility, unqualified bitterness coloring his tone.

"I mean, sure, when we have nothing better to do, maybe we can play along with your little game of pretend. You get to say you never discriminate, never treat us like pigs, that you're a pure, noble, virtuous person, that it's all a misunderstanding, and you're a goddamn saint. Sure, when nothing's going on, we can stroke your stupid ego, but read the fucking mood! One of our friends just fucking died. We don't have the time to indulge your bullshit right now, so get a goddamn clue already, you hypocrite."

"Hyp—"

Hypocrite?

"Or what? Do you think we don't care that our friend just died? —Oh, that's right; to you, the Eighty-Six are just the Eighty-Six, after all. We're inferior pigs who can't compare to a noble human like you, aren't we?!"

"Tha—"

Bombarded with one inconceivable accusation after another, Lena's mind went completely blank.

"That's not true! I have never...!"

"Not true? Which part isn't true?! You're the one safe and sound inside the walls, kicking back while you watch us do all the fighting after your people threw us into this hellhole! You're blatantly accepting what's being done to us by sitting there like you're entitled to comfort! If that's not treating us like pigs, then what would you call it?!"

"...!"

Lena could feel the Processors' emotions through the Resonance. Some were indifferent. Others, Laughing Fox included, carried varying degrees of contempt and hostility. And from others, she simply felt resignation. But the one thing they all had in common was that coldness.

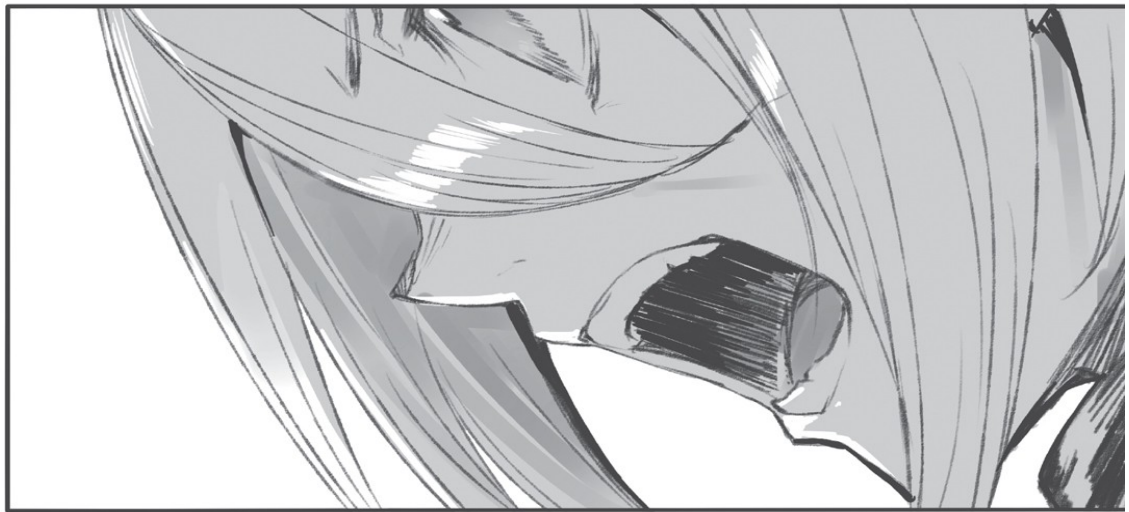
"You never called us Eighty-Six? Not calling us that was the only thing you did do! Protecting the state is a citizen's duty? Answering those feelings? Screw that! Do you think we're fighting out here because we want to?! You're the ones who trapped us here! You forced us to fight! You've let millions of us die these past nine years, haven't you?! And you do nothing to stop that and think that if you talk to us all Goody Two-shoes every night it'll make it all better?! For starters—"

And without a hint of mercy, Laughing Fox ruthlessly gouged into Lena's heart with what followed. The undeniable proof that Lena, despite trying to treat them like humans, had ultimately seen them as pigs.

“—not once have you ever even asked us our names!”

Her breath caught in her throat.

“Ah.....”



That realization left her reeling in utter disbelief. He was right. She didn't know their names. She'd never asked. Not anyone—not even Undertaker, who was always the first to answer her calls. Not Kirschblüte, always the one who talked to her the most. And of course, she'd never told any of them her name. Handler One. She'd presented herself as their supervisor, with just the title that role granted her and only ever in that capacity. It might have been acceptable if it had been by mutual agreement, but otherwise, this was a terribly disrespectful way to treat a fellow human.

And she had done just that, without batting an eye. Without ever realizing. You should know to treat livestock as livestock. Yes, just like her mother had said with her composed expression. Was the only difference between her and Lena that Lena simply never put it into words—?

Tears welled in her eyes. Words wouldn't come, but she could feel a wail of shame clawing its way up her chest, begging to be let out. She clamped her hands over her mouth to suppress it. She'd only just become aware of it. But now she was so terribly afraid of how ugly she could be, of the way she could trample and look down upon someone else as if it was a matter of course, not once feeling shame for it.

Wehrwolf—no, the Colorata boy whose face she'd never seen, whose name she'd never asked for, interjected into the conversation with a low voice.

"Theo."

"Raiden! Are you going to defend this white pig—?"

"Theo."

"...Fine, I get it."

Laughing Fox clicked his tongue once, and his presence disappeared from the Resonance. Heaving a deep sigh, as if to rid himself of the feelings filling his own chest, Wehrwolf turned his attention to Lena.

"Handler One. Close the Resonance."

"...Wehrwolf, I—"

"The battle's over. You have no reason to command us anymore, do you? ... Laughing Fox was out of line, but that doesn't mean we're in the mood to chat with you."

His tone was cold, but the lack of even a sliver of condemnation in his voice felt even more inhumane and detached to Lena. He didn't judge her for her faults, and he didn't blame her, either, because he was completely resigned. Resigned that he was speaking to someone who would never listen to him no matter what he said or did—someone who was only pretending to talk but didn't understand what others were saying. Maybe not even what she herself was saying. A pig in human form.

"...I'm sorry."

Barely managing a shaky reply, she closed the Resonance. Not a single voice had answered those words.

Everyone else gradually cut the link with the Handler, and Theo remained there, feeling terrible. After a while, Anju Resonated with him.

"Theo."

"...I know, okay?" he answered gloomily.

Hating how childish his own voice sounded, Theo sneered in self-loathing.

"I get how you feel, but you went too far. Even if what you said is true, putting it like that was too much."

"Yeah, I get it... Sorry."

He knew that. They'd all decided together that was how it should be and all realized as much before even putting it into words. Which was why, up until now, that was what they'd done. Saying everything on his mind in the harshest possible manner didn't make him feel any better. If anything, it only left him irritated and on edge. He didn't have an outlet for his frustration, and he felt like the precious friends he'd lost would snap at him at any second for his behavior. It was a precious promise, and he'd broken it because of that stupid white pig. But still, the reason he couldn't hold back his anger was definitely...

"...Your old captain?"

"Yeah..."

He could still remember his back, broad and reliable.

He'd been the captain of the first unit Theo had been posted in, back when he'd enlisted at the young age of twelve. The captain had been cheery and jovial, and everyone in the squad had hated him. Theo had hated him, too, at the time. He'd inherited the Personal Mark of a laughing fox from him. And back then, he hadn't known how to draw yet and had tried his best to replicate the drawing of the fox that had always laughed beneath the captain's canopy. But he only ever managed a deformed caricature with an artificial, stuck-on smile.

Theo couldn't forgive that white pig girl who wore the same expression as that captain, who acted like she was some kind of saint for mourning Kaie's death. He couldn't forgive her, but in lashing out at her, all he'd achieved was...

"I'm sorry, Kaie..."

He cast down his eyes, looking at Kirschblüte's burned wreckage. He was used to this by now, to this being the sole remains of friends they weren't permitted to bury or bring back.

"I acted like one of those pigs and dishonored your death..."

You, Kaie. Proud, noble Kaie, even after all the things you went through, not once did you ever put your grudge to words, even at the very end...

On the nights after a death, everyone in the unit would isolate themselves or perhaps stay with one other person, each of them grieving in their own way. So that night, no one came to hang around Shin's room.

The moon and stars shone brightly, so Shin kept the light off. Leaning against his table illuminated by a pale-blue glow, Shin opened his bloodred

eyes at the sound of a modest knock against the windowpane. Looking down from the window, he found Fido standing outside the barracks, extending its crane arm. Pinched between the manipulator at its tip was a thin piece of metal.

"Thanks."

"Pi."

Having made its delivery, Fido flickered its optical sensor once as if blinking before turning around and returning to its regular duties. A Scavenger's usual job consisted of carrying a container full of scrap metal and salvage from the battlefield to the automatic factory's furnace for recycling.

As Shin placed the piece of metal on a cloth he'd laid out beforehand, the Para-RAID activated. Stopping his hands for a moment as he unwrapped a piece of cloth containing a few simple work tools, Shin furrowed his brow. He was the sole recipient of this Resonance, and its sender wasn't someone from the base.

"....."

Shin sighed as the other side remained silent despite having initiated this call. He opened his mouth to speak to the dejected presence on the far end of the collective unconscious.

"Do you need something, Handler One?"

The presence wavered, as if a surprised shiver ran through it, but still remained silent. Shin waited out this noticeably reluctant pause, waiting for the caller to speak. A considerable while after Shin had resumed his work, the Handler girl finally opened her mouth. When he heard her voice, feeble and faint, as if afraid of rejection, his hands stopped.

"...Um..."

She'd thought that if he spurned her, she'd obligingly end the call, right there and then. And it was exactly because she was prepared to do so that hearing Shin's calm voice respond to her as always made her lose her nerve all the more. After a few rounds of attempting to speak and catching her choked breath, the words finally came out.

"...Um, Undertaker. Is now a good time to talk?"

"Sure. Go ahead."

His plain reply came quiet and serene, without a hint of emotion. But Lena realized for the first time that this detached, unchanging tone came not from his composed disposition, but rather from his complete lack of interest in or feeling for her.

Rebuking her heart, which had been on the verge of curling up in fear, she lowered her head. This was probably cowardice, too. She knew she should be saying this to everyone, but she couldn't muster the courage to contact Laughing Fox and Wehrwolf, who probably wouldn't be willing to Resonate with her.

"I'm sorry. For what happened this afternoon and everything I've done until now. I'm truly sorry... Um..."

She clenched both her hands in her lap.

"My name is...Lena. Vladilena...Milizé. I know this might be coming too late, but...could you please tell me your name?"

There was a short pause. Fear weighed down on Lena as she listened to the static noise and the heavy silence on the other side.

"...If what Laughing Fox said is still bothering you..." He sounded indifferent, his words being thrust out curtly, as if he was merely stating the facts. "...Then it shouldn't. What he said doesn't reflect the opinions of everyone else. We all know you didn't personally put us in this situation and that you don't have the power to undo it, either. You have no reason to feel guilty just because someone blamed you for not doing something you can't possibly do."

"But...not even trying to learn your names is terribly disrespectful!"

"You didn't ask for our names because you didn't need to. Why do you think we're obligated to use call signs when the Legion can't tap into the Para-RAID? Why do you think Processors' personnel files are never disclosed?"

Lena pursed her lips bitterly. That unsettling answer easily came to mind.

"So Handlers wouldn't have to see Processors as humans...right?"

"That's right. Most Processors don't live to see a year after drafting. Whoever's in charge probably thought the weight of all those deaths would be too much for a Handler to bear."

"But that's cowardly! I'm..."

Her voice had begun fading before she even noticed.

"...I was a coward...and I don't want to stay that way. If it wouldn't be too much trouble to give me your name...please tell me."

Shin sighed again. This girl can be so obstinate...

"...Kaie Taniya. That's Kirschblüte's—the Processor who died today. That's her real name."

"I"

He could feel happiness coming from the other side of the Resonance, but it died down swiftly when she realized it was the name of the girl who'd been killed. In contrast to that, Shin gave her the names of his companions matter-of-factly.

"Vice Captain Wehrwolf's name is Raiden Shuga. Laughing Fox is called Theoto Rikka. Snow Witch is Anju Emma. Gunslinger is Kurena Kukumila. Black Dog is Daiya Irma—"

He named his twenty squad members, and the Handler added her name to the end.

"And I'm Vladilena Milizé. Please call me Lena."

"I heard you mention it earlier. What's your rank?"

"Oh, yes, of course. It's major. I've only recently been promoted, though..."

"Then I'll refer to you as Major Milizé going forward. Is that acceptable?"

"...Honestly..."

Hearing Shin insist on standing on ceremony and treating her as a commanding officer, Lena smiled wryly. She then noticed something and asked:

"It doesn't seem like anyone's with you today... What are you doing?"

Shin was silent for a second.

"—Her name."

"Huh?"

"I'm taking Kaie's name... Since we Eighty-Six aren't allowed to have graves."

He held up the small piece of metal against the faint-blue moonlight. Painstakingly carved into the rectangular shard of aluminum alloy was Kaie's full name, as well as an inscription in black-and-red paint. It was an etching of a five-petal sakura flower and the symbol for *cherry blossom*—Kirschblüte—written in her people's language, to signify her Juggernaut's Personal Mark.

"When I was still with my first unit, I made a promise with the rest of the folks there. We would etch the names of those who fell in battle on the remains of their Juggernauts, and whoever stayed alive the longest carried these fragments with them. That way, the survivor would be able to take everyone with them to their final destination."

The truth was that, at the time, even retrieving a shard of a dead Processor's unit was often impossible, so they would just use whatever piece of metal or wood they could find and carve the names with a nail. It wasn't much, but it was proof their comrades existed. Shin had only been able to consistently get his hands on the units' debris after Fido learned how to do it. They always tried to gather the piece directly below the canopy, where the Personal Mark was etched onto the armor.

They were all kept together in the equipment compartment in Undertaker's cockpit, since the deaths of his first squad mates right up until now. All so he could fulfill the pact they'd made together.

"I was the last one left back then, and that's how it's always been till now. That's why I have to take them with me. I'll take everyone who fought and died alongside me to my final destination."

His serene voice gouged at Lena's heart. He was different from before, from that unfeeling impression she had of him. She suddenly felt very ashamed. He had carried so much death—all these lost lives—with him, silently shouldering the burden. Bearing everything without letting even a single word of lamentation rise to the surface, shouldering it all as if that was to be expected.

In contrast, she couldn't even properly face one person's death this afternoon, only mourning but not truly coming to terms with it. She finally understood how terribly she must have offended them: the ones who bore the weight of their dead comrades in silence.

"How many have died so far...?"

"Five hundred and sixty-one Processors, including Kaie."

The immediacy of his response made Lena bite her lip. She couldn't even remember how many people had died under her command. Even though the tally was far fewer, if asked, she'd have to consider and count.

"...Is that why they call you Undertaker?"

"That's part of it, yes."

He who silently buried his myriad comrades. In place of the graves they were denied, he carried those little pieces of aluminum and countless memories. It made sense that everyone liked him so much. *This boy known as the Undertaker must be kinder than anyone else—* But just as that occurred to her, her thoughts ground to a halt. With a gasp, Lena opened her eyes wide.

"Um... Undertaker?"

The fact that he still hadn't realized she'd called him by that name stood as evidence of Shin's fundamental lack of interest in everything that went on around him.

"You...still haven't told me *your* name..."

Shin blinked absently a few times. She seemed to be asking whether he didn't want to give her his name, but that wasn't the case. He'd simply forgotten.

"Pardon me. It's Shinei Nouzen."

As far as Shin was considered, his normal name and his Personal Name were both nothing more than codes to specify him, and he didn't particularly mind which one people used. He intended to say as much, but—Hearing Lena gulp in surprise made him raise his eyes quizzically.

"Nouzen...?!"

Before Lena could even finish repeating his name in astonishment, a loud *THUNK!* rang out as something heavy slammed against the floor. Apparently, she'd jumped from her seat, knocking down the chair in the process.

"Could you possibly be related to Shourei Nouzen?! He was a Name Bearer called Dullahan and piloted a unit with a Personal Mark depicting a headless skeletal knight —"

Shin's eyes widened, ever so slightly.



"We're going to see the battlefield, Lena. To see everything that happens there, with our own eyes."

That day, the Republic Armed Forces' Colonel Václav Milizé had boarded a reconnaissance plane with his then ten-year-old daughter, Lena.

"Aren't they fighting there, Father?"

"Yes, that's right. But the Republic... We are doing something even worse than a war there."

Václav was one of the Armed Forces' few survivors, and while he and his comrades fought to defend their family and friends, their beloved homeland

had enacted terrible laws that dealt a horrible blow to their dignity. They had marked a portion of the citizens they were supposed to protect as subhuman and had driven them out of their homes, imprisoned them, and forced them into war. An incident that had happened at a certain small town still refused to leave his memories.

In place of its ruined army, the Republic hurriedly scraped together young conscripts, the majority of them being uneducated fellows who had lost their jobs due to their own sloth and violent tendencies. On top of that, for their first mission, they had guns shoved in their hands and were then ordered to drive out their fellow citizens. Their morale, which was low to begin with, plummeted quickly, and acts of violence and oppression ran rampant among all units.

Václav could still remember the sight of two children watching as the soldiers beat their parents to death, laughing all the while. He would never forget one of the girls, presumably the older sister, and her cold eyes, refusing to shed a single tear. Those eyes would never leave him. Those girls would probably never forgive the Alba or the Republic for as long as they lived.

“...We have to end this... We have to end this as soon as possible.”

The reconnaissance plane sailed across the sky silently, all so Václav could show his daughter what lay beyond the walls.

Those who lived in the First Sector rarely traveled outside the walls. Beyond the outer Sectors’ production plants’ hills and the solar/geothermic/wind-energy plants’ grasslands and forests, the Gran Mule looked down upon all with the solemn majesty of a mighty mountain. When she saw the massive walls for the first time, Lena’s eyes had lit up with excitement. But her expression had darkened, and she fell silent as the minefields and the internment camps surrounded by barbed wire fences came into view. Watching his daughter’s meek expression as she looked out the plane’s window, Václav smiled. Lena was a smart girl. Even without him having to say a word, she learned and understood on her own.

Deploying a military aircraft for personal use and letting an unauthorized civilian board it were both explicit violations of military regulations, but Václav couldn’t have cared less. The Republic military at the time was manned by soldiers in name only, the kind of scum who were only interested in spending their working hours playing games and gambling, changing to alcohol and women at the end of the day.

“Go a bit farther after we finish with the frontline bases, all right? I want her to see the battlefield,” he told the pilot gripping the control stick.

This cheerful pilot was a friend of his and seemed happy to have gotten the chance to fly a plane after being stuck in the eighty-five Sectors for so long. He nodded happily and said:

“Roger that, Colonel... But didn’t the boys over at Transport set that area as a no-fly zone?”

"Eh, don't worry about it. We're not going into the contested zones, and besides, it'll be night by the time we get there. The Legion won't move."

The Legion fundamentally operated during daytime, since they ran off electricity. Ordinarily, they would remain in the areas they controlled and receive energy packs. Once those ran out, they would deploy solar panels and recharge that way. Since they couldn't charge at night, they ran the risk of running out of power midcombat and, as such, tended to avoid nighttime engagements.

If Václav were to be brutally frank, he did want to show Lena just how ferocious fighting against the Legion could become, but...looking at that small back, Václav once again realized he couldn't put his daughter's life at risk for that.

But Václav had forgotten. Perhaps without noticing, he himself had assumed that only the Eighty-Six could die on the battlefield and there was no danger to people like him. There was a reason they were cut off from contact with other countries and why they never attempted to attack the Legion from the sky.

The Stachelschwein.

They had scattered throughout the Republic's sky shortly after the fighting had begun and annihilated their air forces. Hiding between the flocks of communication-jamming butterflies were the Anti-Aircraft Mobile Cannon-type Legion.

The battlefield's dark night sky, far from the artificial lights of civilization, suddenly flashed with light as red flames fell from the heavens with a deafening roar. The reconnaissance plane plummeted, its burning tail leaving a blazing trail in its wake as it rapidly descended toward the earth—A certain squadron's captain, who was out on night patrol, happened to catch sight of the crashing plane.

"Hey. I think I just saw a reconnaissance plane—"

"Huh? Oh. Forget that, Dullahan. It's probably just another stupid pig out sightseeing. A white pig or two dying is cause for us to celebrate more than anything, don'cha think?"

Ignoring his comrade's words, the captain closed his unit's canopy. He had bloodred hair and jet-black eyes hidden behind his glasses.

"Yo, Dullahan, what're you—?"

"I'm going to rescue them... You guys continue the patrol."

When she awoke, she was surrounded by a sea of flames.

Using both hands to straighten herself into an upright seated position, Lena looked around with eyes wide open. Everything was burning. Her father, too, was being roasted by the flames. Everything from his chest up was already gone.

She could hear an odd, loud wailing from outside as she crawled out of the hatch. A huge monster—so large that she was forced to look up at it—waited off to the side, the scarlet of the flames reflecting off the silvery sheen of its body as it looked down at her.

A single red eye that shone like glasswork scrutinized her. An all-purpose machine gun hung from its shoulders, the light glinting off its gray luster. Its arthropod, insect-like legs did not seem to move in sync with one another, creating the disgusting illusion that it was sliding her way.

She could see the pilot a distance away. He was shouting something and desperately firing a machine gun from his waist. Most of his shots missed, but a few hit and were deflected by the monster's armor, merely giving off sparks. The Ameise drew close to him, undisturbed by the bullets, and casually mowed him down with its front legs. The pilot's upper half was severed with almost comical ease, and a pillar of blood gushed out of his now-abandoned lower half.

The Ameise's composite sensor unit then flickered as it turned in Lena's direction. Just as she shrank her body down helplessly—

"If there's anyone still alive, plug your ears and get down!"

A loud voice bellowed at full volume from a speaker. Bursting through the veil of smoke and fire, a quadruped spider leaped in their direction, the night sky and crimson flames as its background. The symbol of a headless knight's skeleton carved into its flank etched itself into Lena's memory.

Both its grappling arms aimed heavy machine guns at the monster and opened fire. The thundering sound of the machine-gun fire tore into Lena's eardrums. The heavy weapons, which made an antipersonnel assault rifle seem like a peashooter in comparison, sprayed the Ameise with bullets capable of easily tearing through concrete walls and blowing armored vehicles to pieces. The lightly armored Ameise took the barrage as if dazed and then collapsed. Lena timidly looked up as the mechanical spider approached her with noisy, heavy footsteps.

"Are you all right?"

It spoke to her with a human voice and human words, but she was terrified. As she curled up in mute terror, the spider's abdomen opened, and a human figure rose from its rear. His hair was a bloodred color, and he wore a pair of black-rimmed glasses. He was a slender, intellectual-looking young man who seemed to be roughly in his twenties.

The man who'd saved her introduced himself as Shourei Nouzen. He took her to a place called a base, a building where lots of mechanical spiders stood. It was completely different from the First Sector, with stars filling up the sky and illuminating everything. There were a lot of other people at the base, but the man said she should stay away from them, and they didn't come closer, either. She did feel them glaring at her from a distance, and that frightened her.

Either way, when she heard his name, Lena blinked in surprise. She had never heard that name, and its ring was terribly unfamiliar.

"...What a weird name..."

"Yeah. Even in the Empire, it's a rare family name only my father's clan used. Same for my first name, too."

The man smiled wryly and shrugged.

"You can just call me Rei. My full name's a mouthful, isn't it? It has some history to it, but the Republic is pretty unfamiliar with it."

"You're not from the Republic?"

"My parents were both born in the Empire, but my little brother and I were born in the Republic... Right, I have a little brother. Should be about your age... He's probably gotten bigger by now."

Rei's smile became terribly lonely when he said that. There was a bitter, nostalgic look in his eyes, as if he were gazing out into the distance.

"You can't go see him?"

"...No. I can't go back yet."

Lena still didn't know yet that Eighty-Six who enlisted didn't get a single day's leave until they were discharged.

He asked if she was hungry, and though she hadn't had dinner, she wasn't. She shook her head, and Rei made an uncomfortable expression. Perhaps assuming she might be more receptive to sweets, he brought her some chocolate melted into hot water. Even the young Lena realized how precious chocolate must be here.

"Father said..."

"Hmm?"

"He told me we're doing something really bad to the Colorata. You're a Colorata, mister, so why did you protect me?"

Confronted with that direct question, Rei's expression took on a visibly bothered shade. It was the same face adults always made whenever Lena asked complicated questions, questions they always tried to dodge and not answer.

"...That's right. You're right—some pretty terrible stuff is happening to us right now. Our freedom was stolen from us along with our dignity. Those are unforgivable things, things that should never be allowed to happen to anyone. People are doing those horrible things to us, saying we're not civilians or even human, but subhuman pigs."

Deep, cold anger flickered in his dark eyes for a moment. He took a sip from his mug, as if trying to stifle that emotion.

"Still, we are Republic citizens. We were born in this country and raised in this country."

Those quiet words rang resolutely and passionately in Lena's ears.

"Even if no one acknowledges that anymore, that's exactly why we need to prove it. Protecting the motherland is a Republic citizen's duty and pride. That's why we fight. We fight and protect to prove that we can defend this country... So they can never belittle us and assume we're like the scum who can only talk and never act."

Lena blinked quizzically. To fight. To protect. To prove. But they were fighting things like that horrible monster from earlier...

"Aren't you scared...?"

"We're terrified. But if we don't fight, we can't survive."

Shrugging with a smile, Rei raised his eyes to the starlit sky. It glittered with stardust and looked like it should be making noise, but the fact that it was ever so silent struck Lena as terribly eerie. Between them and that flickering brilliance was an endlessly vast, endlessly deep void of pitch-black darkness.

The smile he'd worn on his lips to that point faded. Rei spoke resolutely, as if making an earnest oath.

"I won't die. I can't afford to die. I have to survive and go back. I have to go back to where my brother is waiting."

†

The now sixteen-year-old Lena could still remember Rei's earnest words and determined expression clearly, even years later. That was why, when she heard his family name unexpectedly, she couldn't contain her excitement and rose to her feet. She didn't even notice she'd knocked over her chair or that her teacup had fallen to the floor and shattered.

Rei had said his family name was unusual even in the Empire, and indeed, Lena had never heard of any other Nouzen aside from him. If they were from the same family and he was the same age as Lena, was it possible—?

Shin eventually spoke, answering that question. His voice sounded like he had suddenly awakened from slumber, with a dumbfounded tone Lena had never heard from this boy.

"...That was my brother."

"Your brother... Then that means..."

The little brother Rei said he couldn't meet again but wanted to see. The little brother he swore to return to—

Shin was that little brother.

"He said he wanted to see you and had to return to you... Do you know where your brother is right now?"

In contrast to Lena's voice, which was filled with excitement and elation, the emotionless coolness returned to Shin's words as he spoke.

"He passed away. Five years ago, on the eastern front."

Oh...

"...I'm sorry."

"It's all right."

His curt reply sounded as if he really didn't care one way or the other. The contrast between the coldness of his voice and the warmth of Rei's when he'd spoken of his little brother left Lena feeling confused. There was something different about Shin's silence that could not be explained by him having grown accustomed to seeing death. Lena struggled to find something to say to break the silence, and eventually, Shin spoke up.

"Do you remember when you asked me what I wanted to do once I was discharged?"

"Y-yes, of course."

"I still don't have anything I want to do in particular, even after I've been discharged. But there is something I *have* to do... I'm looking for my brother. For the past five years, it's all I've been doing."

Lena tilted her head. If Rei is already dead, and Shin already knows it, how...?

"Do you mean...his body?"

She could feel him smiling faintly.

Smiling...but not truly laughing. It was similar to a sneer but much colder. Like how a blade's lurid, glistening edge could captivate one's gaze... It was like madness.

"—No."

†

The next day.

The rest of the squadron heard the gist of their conversation from Shin, and when the Handler Resonated with them that night, they all joined in. She apologized and then asked each and every one of them for their names. Theo seemed particularly awkward.

"...Why'd you have to go and do that, Shin?"

"You regretted it, didn't you? You felt bad about the way you said it, even if you meant every word."

He was pretty observant, considering he never seemed to be looking at them. It annoyed Theo to know how transparent he was. Daiya was smirking, and Anju seemed to be looking over at him warmly, and God dammit, Kurena, why are you looking the other way like you've got nothing to do with this?! You were just as pissed off as I was, and I know for a fact that if I hadn't snapped at her, you'd have been yelling at her instead!

"Wait a sec, uh, Major Milizé, was it? Didn't Shin tell you our names already?"

"I asked him, yes. But I haven't heard them from all of you yet."

Even though she knew their names, she still wanted them to tell her themselves... *What a pain.*

Shin wouldn't say anything, and the Handler seemed to be shrinking in fear like a child awaiting punishment for knowing their names ahead of time. Observing this uncomfortable situation, Theo realized he was just about over it. He was never good at staying angry or stubborn enough to stay put out for long.

"...I remember this one guy. He was my captain in the first squad I was assigned to."

Lena seemed to have been taken aback by the sudden change in topic, but Theo continued without minding her.

"The dumb ass always had this cheery smile on his face, and he was a former soldier, so he was pretty strong... And he was an Alba."

He could feel that her breath had caught in her throat from the other side of the Resonance.

"Dude was a total weirdo. Even though he survived the first defensive battles at the start of the war, he thought it was messed up that only the Eighty-Six did the fighting, so he returned to the front lines on his own. We couldn't say anything to his face, but the whole squad trash-talked him like crazy behind his back. We all hated his guts. I mean, how couldn't we? He called himself a Processor like us, but the captain *chose* to be here. We never got that choice. And sure, he came here, but whenever he got tired of it, he could just drop everything and go back to living inside the walls. Whenever he acted like he was one of us, it pissed us off so much. We'd place bets on when we thought he'd get tired of his pity game and hightail it back home."

"..."

"But it turns out, we were wrong. The captain never went back home until the very end. He never went back, and then he died. He stayed behind to defend other Processors and got himself killed."

Theo was the one to hear his last words. He was closest to the captain when he told everyone else to retreat, and the captain sent him a radio transmission telling him he could hang up if he wanted, but he had something he wanted him to hear.

"I know you guys hate me. It's natural—of course you would. That's why I never said anything.

"You have every right to hate me. Because I didn't come here to help you, nor did I come here to save you.

"I only just...knew I could never forgive myself if I let you guys fight for us alone. It scared me. I only came to the battlefield for my own sake. So it's only natural you'd never forgive me.

"Please. Never forgive me."

Then the line suddenly filled with noise, and the transmission was cut off. That was when Theo realized the captain chose to send a radio transmission instead of Resonating because he knew what was coming. He'd returned to this battlefield of certain death with a warrior's resolve, willing and prepared to never return.

Theo regretted not talking to him more and still carried that regret with him to this day.

"I'm not saying you're the same as the captain. But so long as you're an Alba sitting on the other side of that wall, we can never be equals, and we will never think of you as one of us."

Having said his piece, Theo stretched his back once. Everyone else knew this story, and he'd told and reflected on it so many times that touching on it didn't hurt him anymore.

"Right, so stupid story time is over... I'm Theoto Rikka, by the way. You can call me Theo or Rikka or your cute little piggy boy or whatever stupid name you want."

"There's nothing stupid about your name... I'm sorry. For everything I did up until yesterday. Truly."

"Forget about that already, you stick in the mud."

"So that nice person Kaie talked about...was that Captain, correct?"

"It wasn't just him. Everyone here has someone who fought hard in one way or another."

They fought against this fabricated world created by their brethren.

"..."

Raiden was the next to speak.

"I'm the vice captain. The name's Raiden Shuga... I gotta apologize first. When you started Resonating every night, we mocked you and thought you were some patronizing hypocrite, a gullible idiot who didn't realize how much of a pig she really was. So I apologize for that. But on top of that..."

His iron eyes narrowed.

"...just like Theo said, we don't see you as an equal or a comrade. You're a moron who spouts lip service while walking all over us. Nothing will ever change that, and we'll never see you differently. If you're fine with that, we'll kill some time talking to you. Not that I recommend it. You're not fit to be a Handler... You're better off quitting."

"If you're willing to kill your time with me, I'll keep Resonating."

Raiden smirked wryly. His masculine, wolf-like face took on an amicable shade.

"You're one serious idiot, you know that...? Oh, and send that map over already. You were so busy crying your eyes out yesterday, you forgot to send it."

Lena laughed this time.

"You'll have it before you know it."

As Shin half listened to that exchange, his thoughts wandered to the talk he'd had with Lena the day before.

Shourei Nouzen. A name he hadn't heard in a long time and one he'd thought he'd never hear again. He'd been on the verge of forgetting that was even his name. Right, yeah. That's what he was called. Until the very end, Shin had never called him by his name. Not once. Without noticing, Shin fastened the scarf around his neck.

Brother.

INTERLUDE

THE HEADLESS KNIGHT

Fresh snow began falling on the city ruins in which he'd taken shelter. Shin's platoon had been completely annihilated, and he'd fled here for cover. Hiding in an abandoned library, Shin sat with his back to the Juggernaut he'd piloted in the year since enlisting, its scarred surface carrying remnants of countless battles. Resigning himself to momentary slumber, he waited for dawn to break.

His small twelve-year-old body was somehow tolerating the night's chill. The library's walls had thankfully been spared from the cave-ins, and Shin sat in a windowless archive in the building's depths, wrapping himself with a thin blanket.

The Legion loitering about the ruins began retreating once their energy reserves started waning. Once dawn broke, he'd be able to return to base. Though he had a feeling that Fido, a Scavenger he'd become oddly attached to since his time in his old unit, might show up before then.

Suddenly, he felt as if someone had called him.

It was different from the voices of the ghosts he could hear ever since he'd died for the first time. It wasn't a sound but a feeling that someone was calling him. A voice he'd lost once before and thought he'd never hear again. What was it?

He went outside, as if drawn in by the call. The city, primarily decorated in the colors of cast iron and stone, was covered by a blanket of white and a haze of blurry shadows. The heavy snow fell harshly but silently, quietly submerging the town and the rubble, perhaps even the darkness of the night itself, with its white tyranny. The beauty of it threatened to bleach Shin's very soul.

Crossing the main street covered by debris and snow, he found himself in a plaza at the city's center. At the other edge of the plaza were two spires, one being the ruins of a tragically crumbled church. Hidden behind a veil of snow and darkness, a massive corpse lorded over the place solemnly.

The remains of a Juggernaut lay there, like a toppled skeleton. Its canopy was nowhere to be found, likely having been blown off much earlier. On its bent armor, crumpled and battered by wind and rain, he could still faintly make out the Personal Mark of a headless skeleton. Shin approached the machine, his legs sinking into the snow, and looked into the exposed cockpit.

"...Brother."

If he'd been asked how he knew it was him, the only answer Shin would have been able to provide was that he simply knew. He could confidently declare it as fact, independent of logic or reason. Resting in the cockpit, trapped where it would never speak again within the confines of that cramped white darkness with snow its only blanket, lay his brother's headless, skeletal corpse.

CHAPTER 4

I AM LEGION, FOR WE ARE MANY

Jolted awake by a ring from her portable terminal notifying her of a new e-mail, Lena sat up and stretched. She'd left the information terminal on, its holo-screen displaying a paused image from a gun camera feed, and on the terminal itself lay a sea of papers, combat logs she had printed out.

The sunlight streaming through the curtain of her east-facing room was bright. Putting on a thin, transparent gown that hung from her clothes rack and brushing her fingers through her hair, Lena got out of bed. Opening her e-mail client, she saw the message was from Annette.

The Revolution Festival is coming up next month, right? Let's go pick party dresses together on our next day off.

After a brief pause to think, she punched in a short reply and hit SEND.

Sorry! I've been a bit busy lately. Invite me again some other time, okay?

A reply came immediately—

You're blowing me off a lot lately, Lena.

—followed by yet another e-mail.

Devoting yourself to the Eighty-Six like this won't do anyone any good, you know.

Lena turned around for a moment. Behind her were the Spearhead squadron's combat logs, which she'd tried to make some progress analyzing yesterday. She had meticulously gathered the badly scrawled together mission reports and the Juggernauts' mission recorder data files. The patrol reports were, for whatever reason, as empty as ever, but putting those aside, it was a veritable mountain of gold, a real treasury of information regarding anti-Legion tactics.

This would help everyone survive. It would be useful. She was sure of it.

Sorry.

†

“—Why not go?”

Shin replied indifferently, answering the idle conversation they were having over the Sensory Resonance while servicing the assault rifle he usually stored in Undertaker's cockpit. They'd taken to chatting during the report, technically when they should have been out on patrol.

It was early afternoon, and Shin was in his room in the barracks. The kitten, which he'd locked out of the room to prevent it from toying with the rifle's parts, scratched at the door desperately.

“But what if a raid happens in the middle of the party?”

Lena seemed terribly dissatisfied. It was very much like her to be so overly serious, if not too inflexible.

"Nothing in particular will happen."

"I'm surprised they can even hold a party in the middle of a war."

"I'm sure there are battles going on in some Sector or another out there. Whatever happens inside the walls doesn't influence what goes on out here."

He pulled out the cam pin and removed the bolt from the carrier group, placing the parts on a cloth he'd spread out. Assault rifles weren't effective against most Legion, but they did have their uses. There could come a time when this would be the only weapon available to him, so leaving it untended wasn't an option.

"I think you should go. Your analysis is appreciated, but there's no reason we should be monopolizing your personal time, Major."

Lena fell silent at those words.

"Is what I'm doing unnecessary, by any chance...?"

"Not at all. Your assistance is greatly appreciated."

Those were his honest feelings. Shin wouldn't say or do something just to stroke a commanding officer's ego.

"In the end, we only know the front lines. Having the perspective of an educated officer and data analysis coming from an outlook with a grasp on the whole situation is priceless."

"...That's good to hear."

"But that said, you don't have to spend all your time on us."

He could sense Lena pouting on the other side of the line. Removing the extractor pin, Shin continued speaking in his usual monotone.

"If you keep your mind on the battlefield too much, you'll end up like me."

Lena sighed, unable to tell whether those words were serious or his idea of a joke. Either way, she was left without much motivation.

"So you joke around sometimes, too, Captain Nouzen... Fine, I understand. I'll try to enjoy myself while I'm there. I'm sure I'll be having the time of my life between the stupid party and the high heels and dress."

Having answered his joke with a jab of her own apparently earned her a laugh from Shin's side.

"The Revolution Festival, was it? Right, there was something like that back then, wasn't there?"

"Do you remember anything about it?"

Shin was silent for a moment.

"I think there were fireworks? In a park with a fountain, in front of the palace."

Lena raised her head in surprise.

"That's right! That's the Presidential Palace Luñè, in the First Sector... Did you use to live in the First Sector, Captain?"

The First Sector's residential block had been an affluent neighborhood since the days of the monarchy, and its inhabitants were all families that

had lived there since ages past... But Celena families, who were venerable noble houses, seemed to be its primary residents. Colorata inhabitants were a rare sight there, even before everything changed nine years ago.

Maybe she had passed by Shin without realizing sometime in the past. That thought left Lena with a lonely feeling in her heart.

"I don't really remember, but probably with the rest of my family... I can remember my brother walking with me somewhere, holding my hand."

Lena had to hold back a gasp. She did it again.

"I'm sorry..."

"...What for?"

"That was insensitive of me. Last time, too... I mean, your family and your brother..."

"Oh..."

In contrast to Lena's discouraged tone, Shin sounded rather curt.

"I don't mind. I hardly remember anyway."

Shin should have been fairly young when he was separated from his family. Or perhaps five years of fighting for his life through the flames of war had consumed even those precious memories.

For a moment, the image of a child standing still, having lost his way back home on the field of battle, flashed in Lena's mind.

"—He said he had to live and come back. Come back to you."

She tried to recall and convey the words Rei had left behind and etched into her memories as accurately as possible. Lena spoke while holding the image of Rei saying those things in her mind. Sensory Resonance conveyed their voices to one another via their consciousness, and when Resonating, they could tell what the other felt as if they were facing each other.

She hoped her memories of Rei might come across, even if Shin had forgotten. His visage and voice remained in Lena's heart still.

"He said, with so much love in his eyes, that you'd probably gotten bigger. I could tell how much you meant to him. Your brother really, honestly...wanted to come back to you."

"...It'd be nice if you were right."

His reply came after a pause and carried a certain wavering, a shiver, as if he hoped she was right but knew without a doubt that things weren't so.

"Captain...?"

Shin didn't respond, and Lena fell silent, realizing he didn't want to discuss the topic any further. The only thing that disturbed the silence was the faint sound of metallic rattling. The sound eventually grew louder, culminating in a very particular, familiar *clack*. Lena tilted her head in surprise.

"Captain, are you disassembling a rifle, by any chance?"

Shin seemed to hesitate for a second.

"...Yes, I am."

"I thought you were on patrol right now."

Silence.

Realizing why the patrol reports were always so lacking, Lena sighed heavily. And yet somehow, the Spearhead squadron's reaction time was always extraordinarily fast. She never did ask how they could always tell where the Legion were, even faster than the radar could pinpoint them.

"If you think the patrols are unnecessary, then I suppose they are... And the same holds true for the rifle."

The Eighty-Six weren't allowed to carry firearms of any kind.

"I believe you're using them because you have to, so I have no intention of judging you for this...but do keep them maintained and in good shape."

"...Thank you."

Not expecting to hear that tone coming from Shin, Lena blinked in surprise.

"Did I...say something that unusual?"

"No... I just thought you'd be angrier about this, Major."

Hearing him express his surprise, Lena found her gaze wandering. True, when she'd just been assigned, she would nag Shin about submitting his reports and may have made a habit of complaining about how her colleagues in headquarters scoffed at the regulations.

"That's not really... I don't mean to be a straitlaced stickler for regulations and prohibitions that don't have much meaning to them. Like I've said, you're the ones in the position to decide what's necessary or unnecessary to survive on the battlefield, and I intend to respect your decisions."

Someone like me, who's never known the battlefield, has no place to argue with you. That bitter thought momentarily crossing her mind, Lena shook her head and set her train of thought back on track.

"At any rate, I suppose even spare weapons you find lying around require maintenance. The Republic's assault rifles are terribly heavy. People in the eighty-five Sectors hate having to carry them around, let alone practice using them."

The standard model used by the Republic military employed high-caliber, full-size rifle bullets, and as such was made entirely out of sturdy metal alloy. This was done on the assumption they might have to fight armored opponents, but as a result, the rifles were exceptionally heavy.

Shin was, oddly enough, rather surprised.

"Heavy? Really?"

Lena was taken aback by how genuinely shocked he sounded, but then it occurred to her: *Yes, of course. He is a boy, after all.* That realization made her terribly awkward and self-conscious. Because, well, yeah... She'd never spoken to a boy alone for so long.

"...Major?"

Sensory Resonance transmitted the feelings one might read on another's expression, and from Shin's perspective, it was as if Lena had suddenly blushed without warning.

"I-it's nothing. Ah, hmm..."

Abruptly, the atmosphere on Shin's side of the Resonance became extremely tense. She could sense Shin had risen to his feet silently, his gaze fixed somewhere far away. The static that always rumbled in the distance like a continuo felt as if it had become just a bit stronger.

"Captain Nouzen?"

"Please get ready for battle."

Lena turned her gaze to the information terminal in search of an alert, but it remained as silent as ever. Shin's words, however, were crystal clear.

"The Legion are coming."

Having Resonated with Shin ahead of time, Lena had participated in the strategy meeting. Shin concisely but accurately detailed everything from the enemy's numbers to the way their forces were divided and deployed, down to the estimated route they would charge through. Seeing the sheer amount of detail he provided left Lena utterly astonished. Did his interception strategies always include information that was so accurate and thorough?

The meeting continued, and as it did, Lena proposed a few different options. Her suggestions were eventually accepted, and the operation commenced after a concise overview of the strategy they would apply.

"The main force is presumably a mixed platoon of Grauwolf types."

Each unit was stationed at a different spot in the area they designated as their kill zone in order to ambush the Legion. Lena reported the enemy's unit composition—the only detail they were hazy about, oddly enough—inferring it by cross-referencing the radar and records of past battles.

"Judging from their production rate and maintenance efficiency, Tank types should be scarce due to us destroying so many of them during the last battle. That said, I find it hard to believe they would adopt a strategy that would place the Anti-Tank Artillery types in the front."

The Stier were lacking in terms of mobility, and their anti-tank self-propelled shells were rather poorly armored, making them viable only in ambushes. Having been designed similar to tanks, Stier had similar weaknesses—the same weaknesses humankind had tried to eliminate since the invention of the treadmill tank.

"Anti-light-armor rounds may not be effective on the Tank types, but Dragoon types are comparatively lightly armored and can't rely on covering fire from the Long-Range Gunner types. If we take out the Scout types quickly, we should be able to render them helpless."

"Wehrwolf to all units. I just confirmed it by sight. The major's prediction was spot-on."

Raiden, who had just returned from a recon run, confirmed Lena's words. His tone went beyond admiration and into astonishment.

"I mean, you keep talking about production rate and maintenance efficiency... Do you even sleep at night, woman?"

Shin cut into their conversation abruptly.

"Major. Could you cut off your Para-RAID for this mission?"

"Huh?"

"We'll be fighting a unit of Grauwolf types in an urban area, which should result in melee clashes. We'll be coming in close contact with the enemy. Staying Resonated with me with this many...around is dangerous."

Every word Shin uttered was in perfect Republic tongue, but she couldn't piece together what he'd just said. *What did Shin just say?*

With this many Black Sheep around?

"If you want an explanation, I'll give you one later. Cut off your Para-RAID."

She realized perfectly well that there was no time for explanations when they were on the verge of battle, but being told to abandon her duties for no good reason made Lena reflexively become defiant.

"The other squad members are still connected to you, and with the Eintagsfliege's jamming, wireless transmissions may not work if anything happens. I will not cut off my connection."

She denied his request grumpily. Shin seemed to want to say something, but having seen that the Legion had gotten far too close, he swallowed his words.

"...For what it's worth, I warned you."

Leaving Lena with that bitter parting remark, Undertaker rose to his feet.

The fighting was as hectic as Shin had said it would be, with friend and foe exchanging places in the blink of an eye. Lena glared at the radar, which was struggling to display the unit blips under the pressure of the electronic jamming, while she pressed one hand against her ear. *What is this?* The noise was horrible. It wasn't coming from her room, so it must have been what Shin was hearing on the battlefield. But what was making this sound?

A red blip, representing an enemy unit, was approaching a blue blip, which stood for a friendly. It was Undertaker. Shin's unit. On the faraway battlefield, the red blip was approaching Shin, pressing in on him in what was truly arm's reach as the two points of light crossed on the radar screen

—

An unfamiliar voice echoed with bloodcurdling clarity inside Lena's ears.

"—Mommy."

It was an empty, hollow plea, like the final, faint gasp of a dying person. As Lena stood frozen in place, the whispering continued, repeating that single word that had been drained of all its nostalgia and emotion in the face of the boundless totality of death.

"Mommy. Mommy. MomMY. MomMy. MOmMy. MoMMY. moMMy. MomMY. MOmMy. MomMY. MoMMy. MOMMY. mommy. MomMy MoMMY moMMy. mommy. MomMy MOmMy. MomMy. MOMMY. MomMy moMMy mommy. MOmMy. MomMy. MOMMY. MomMY MOmMy—"

"Eek—?!"

Every hair on Lena's body stood on end.

She tried plugging her ears with her hands, but the sound, emanating from the Sensory Resonance, ignored those fruitless efforts. That dying wail

assaulted her again and again, calling out to its mother. The word had lost all semblance of language, degrading into a series of utterances, into noise. That dying breath mercilessly repeated in her ears, its persistence matched only by how broken it was.

A scream from the pit of her stomach blew away the voice crying for its mother, but it was only replaced by other moans of similar tone, worming their way into her consciousness in rapid succession.

“Help me help me help me helpme helpme helpME HELPme hElpmE Helpme Helpm —”

“It’s hot It’s hot It’s hot It’shot It’shot It’SHoT it’shot It’sHOT IT’Sshot it’ShtOt.”

“No... No... NoNoNoNONONOnononononononOnONo.”

“Mama, mama, mama, mama, mama MaMAMamaMaMamAmA.”

“I don’t want to die. I don’t want to die. I don’t want to die I don’twanttodie I don’twanttodie I don’tWaNtTodiE idoNtwanTtOdle.”

“N-no... NOOO—!”

The screams of agony crushed her thoughts and reasoning. Somewhere among the endless cycle of moans, she could hear Shin’s voice.

“Major, cut the link! Major Milizé!”

The boy’s usually composed demeanor was uncharacteristically tense, but it failed to penetrate the wall of panic in Lena’s mind. She plugged her ears as hard as she could, curling up in fear and screaming to drown out the voices, but it was to no avail. And just as she thought her sanity would snap under the force of the dying choir—

“Tch.”

—clicking his tongue in frustration, Shin severed the Resonance. The otherworldly moaning instantly stopped.

“.....Ah...”

Lena raised her head fearfully and hesitantly removed her hands from her ears... Total silence. She was completely cut off from the Processors.

Lena gazed at the dim control room blankly, breathing heavily with her eyes wide. Apparently, she had fallen off the chair in her panic, because she was sitting on the floor.

What...was that...?

That wasn’t any of the Processors. It wasn’t any of them, and there were far too many, a countless number chanting. And within that cadence of suffering, she’d heard someone familiar. It was...

—I don’t want to die...

“...Kirschblüte... Kaie...?”

Just as he cut the Resonance with Lena, the “herd” of Black Sheep began swarming around Shin, who squinted in pain at the incessant storm of wails and shrieks. The majority of the enemy force were Grauwolf types, and having to cleave his way through them in a flurry of slashes with the high-frequency blade, which sliced through their thin armor like butter, made him take too long to sever the connection with his Handler.

Countless shrieks, wheezes, and groans all coalesced into a cacophony of palpable anguish that shook Shin to his core and threatened to rupture his eardrums. But the trade-off was that, at this distance, one could hear each individual voice clearly, and Theo was the first to realize it through his Resonance with Shin.

“Holy shit, no... *That was Kaie just now...*!”

Shin could feel several people gasp in horror, and within a moment, the line exploded in an uproar.

“Kaie...?! Those sons of bitches *took her...*?!”

“God dammit... Didn’t Anju cremate her...?”

While his comrades lamented their friend’s fate, Shin focused on the countless weeps, trying to trace them back to “Kaie.” This was an impossible feat for the others, who were Resonating only thanks to the Para-RAID, but Shin, being an original, could do it. It didn’t take long to find what he sought, and before long, he knew its distance and direction. What he had just performed was an act even more precise than finding a needle in a haystack, a feat that transcended the five senses.

Kurena was closest to the target.

“Gunslinger. Direction 060, distance 800. There’s a group of fifteen. She’s at the front row, second Grauwolf from the right.”

“...Roger.”

Kaie’s voice, which continually wept that it didn’t want to die, cut off the moment the shot connected. It was an army of the dead, of ghosts that lingered and could not move on until they were destroyed.

Still within that endless spiral of wails that threatened to crush his very soul, Shin heaved a single sigh of pity.

“So now it’s a grudge match, huh...?”

An army of ghosts that could not move on until they were destroyed. As if wishing to pass to the place they should have gone.

He’d suddenly realized that the Handler girl probably wouldn’t Resonate with him again...and was exasperated with himself for thinking it a shame.

†

It took Lena until sunset to muster the will to reactivate the Para-RAID.

Ever since then, every time she tried to connect, a surge of fear assailed her along with a wave of nausea, and by the time she finally managed to make the call, night had fallen—nearly time for lights out at the base.

She timidly thought that calling this late might be a bother but raised her head to push that thought away. She knew that if she put it off now, she would probably never Resonate with them again. She would keep pushing it to the next day, using the same excuse over and over.

Conscious of her hastening breath, she inhaled deeply and activated the Para-RAID. Thankfully, the person she was contacting hadn’t retired to bed yet. The call connected immediately. She Resonated with one person—and

that person only. He was the one who'd told her to cut off the link, and he was also the one who'd warned her that staying Resonated would be dangerous. She thought he was the right person to ask.

"...Captain Nouzen."

She could faintly feel Shin open his eyes.

"It's Milizé. Um, are you free now?"

There was an odd pause before he spoke. And for whatever reason, she could faintly hear the sound of water running ever since she connected.

"...I'm taking a shower at the moment."

"H-huh?!"

Lena had never heard herself screeching this hysterically. Flushing red up to her ears, Lena had trouble thinking of anything to say, her thoughts going back and forth in flustered circles. It was a different sort of panic compared to this afternoon, but she somehow managed to pull herself together and squeeze out the words.

"I-I'm sorry. Yes, of course, it's this late, after all... I-I'll end the call now."

Shin's voice was, predictably enough, composed to an almost cheeky degree.

"I don't mind, but I'll be going to sleep after this. If you have anything to ask, you can ask me now. If you don't mind, of course, Major."

"V-very well, then... In that case..."

All things considered, Lena's father had died when she was young, and she'd never had any brothers, to say nothing of a lover. This situation was a touch too stimulating for her chaste heart, and she was helplessly aware of her burning cheeks as she opened her mouth to speak.

"Ah... How did the battle go? Did anyone get hurt or...killed...?"

"We're all fine. Is that what you called me for...?"

"No, but..."

Even for elites like them, there were no guarantees when fighting the Legion. Especially not in the midst of those horrific screams... She couldn't hold back the terrifying thought they'd all died while engulfed by that noise and that maybe there would be no one to Resonate with.

"Captain... What were those voices I heard back there...?"

As soon as the question left her lips, she felt a terrible chill in the pit of her stomach. The static she'd always heard in the background of the Resonance, that beat in continuo, like the rustling of leaves in the depths of the forest, like the sound of distant traffic. She now realized it was the distant echo of that mass of screams and moans. She'd finally realized why Shin was called the Reaper and why every Handler that worked with him was petrified. This was the reason.

"What are they...?"

"..."

For a moment, all she could hear was the patter of water.

"There was once a time when I failed to die."

A dull, distant pain flashed across Lena's neck. A dim, heavy feeling of constriction. As if something were strangling her. It was coming not from Lena's own neck but rather from the Sensory Resonance... In other words, from Shin.

"No, I probably did die that day. And I can hear the voices because I'm the same as them... The voices of the ghosts, of the dead who linger, without disappearing."

"Ghosts..."

She remembered talking to Annette about her father's accident. About how if one increased the RAID Device's nerve stimulation to its theoretical maximum and Resonated with the consciousness of the world itself, with something in the abyss, there would be no coming back.

But then, what if all those who died went back to that world? To the abyss? Perhaps those who had nearly died, those who had nearly fallen into the abyss...could connect with whatever was down there, just like how the Para-RAID connected humans. Could they, for instance, connect with those who had died and fallen into the abyss? Those who yearned to return to the bodies they'd once inhabited...? Could they connect with ghosts?

But something didn't add up. Because those were...

"...The Legion...right?"

She'd heard the voices the moment the Grauwolf types had approached, and Shin had said something along those lines before the battle started.

"The Legion are ghosts, too. They lost their reason to exist as weapons once the Empire fell, so they wander, burdened with the dying will of their creators... An army composed of the ghosts of a dead country."

"...So the reason you can always tell when the Legion are coming..."

"Yes. It's because I can hear them. I can tell if they start coming closer. I can always tell, even when I sleep."

"Wait just a moment...!"

Lena cried out. He made it sound trivial, but there was no way it was that simple. He could tell when they were getting closer—? Even the closest enemy base should have been unbelievably far away. Who knew how many Legion could be in that range?!

The voices of the ghosts—that distant sound of traffic, of rustling. The Para-RAID was set to a low sync ratio, so it could pick up only the speaker's voice and the sound of their body movements. The only other things it could detect would have to be loud enough to reverberate against the body. If Lena could just hear it as a faint rustling...what did this stirring she'd always heard when she Resonated with Shin sound like to him?

"What can you hear right now, Captain? How far away is it, and what does it sound like...?"

"I don't know the exact distance, but I can hear every Legion within the Republic's old borders... Though, when they're far away or move in a group, I can't tell them apart individually."

It was a world that defied all description. Even if, individually, they came across only as whispers, it was every single Legion on every front. And he felt it, every single moment of every day. Even when he was asleep.

"Isn't it...hard for you?"

"I'm used to it. It's been a long time."

"How long...?"

He didn't answer. Lena decided to move on to the next question.

"Second Lieutenant Kaie Taniya. I heard her voice back there. Was it because she...um, became a ghost?"

It was still hard for her to process, much less articulate. Her common sense was getting in the way of that. There was a brief silence. The sound of the water stopping. The feeling of wet hair being brushed up.

"I've heard the Republic estimates the war should end in two years at most. Is that right?"

"Y-yes... How did you know?"

She nodded, taken aback by the change in topic. She thought the Processors weren't informed, so as to not inspire any needless hope in them.

"Theo heard it from the captain he told you about, and I heard about it from him... The Legion's central processors have a life span built into them, and they should shut down in a little under two years, correct?"

"...Yes."

The Legion's central processors had a structure diagram based on a mammal's central nervous system to create liquid nanomachines. They indeed had processing power rivaling that of a large mammal's cognitive abilities, but they were also integrated with a fixed time limit and a program that would erase that structure diagram.

"When I heard about it from Theo, it all started making sense. At first, even if I could hear the Legion's voice, it was just jumbled noise. But after a certain period of time, I started hearing people's voices mixed in with them. I had an idea of how it happened, but until then, I didn't know why they did it."

She could feel hair being wiped with a roughness a woman would never even think to attempt and the indistinct rustling of fabric. And irritatingly enough, she could even tell how starchy and stiff the fabric was.

"If their central processors' structure was gradually being lost, all they'd have to do is replace it with the structure diagram from something else... And there were plenty of available substitutes, after all."

"...No, it can't be."

"Yes. The most developed central nervous system of all mammals. The human brain."

The image that came to mind made Lena sick to her stomach. It went beyond grotesquerie—it was utter defilement of human dignity—but Shin's voice remained as composed as ever.

"To be exact, I don't think it's the brain itself as much as it is a copy of it. If they used actual brains, they'd rot before long, and casualties don't leave bodies behind, in

most cases. Corpses with minimal brain damage are rare, I suppose. And in practice, we run into multiple Legion who share the same voice fairly often. Kaie is probably still out there, somewhere."

A clockwork ghost, perpetually replaying that poor girl's final moments like an incessant music box.

"So we call them ghosts, but I think they're different from what people consider souls. Maybe calling them vestiges of one's existence would be more accurate. Even if they carry someone's consciousness, it's impossible to communicate with them. And since they replicate the brain at the state it was postmortem, they only ever cycle through thoughts the person had on the brink of death."

"Black Sheep..."

"Right. Black Sheep, possessed by the ghosts of the dead, that hide among the rest of the Legion... The White Sheep."

Even if it entered into a state of decay after death, the human cerebrum was still the most developed among all mammals. Its high cognitive ability was probably greater than what the Legion's central processors were originally capable of. So left with the choice between that and having their structure diagram wiped, the Black Sheep, possessed by the wails of the dead, continued to rise in number.

There was a hint of mercy in Shin's voice. These mechanical ghosts had lost their country, their reason to exist and fight, and were reduced to devouring corpses in order to fight and die in the name of that last will.

"...I think I can kind of understand why they're attacking the Republic."

"Huh?"

"They're ghosts. They linger even though they shouldn't, and they can't move on until someone destroys them. I think they want to move on and attack other, fellow ghosts so they can move on together."

"Fellow...ghosts...?"

Whose ghosts? He was referring to someone who was still alive but became inhuman. Did he mean the Eighty-Six, who were dead as far as society was concerned?

"I mean the Republic. Didn't it die nine years ago...? Is there a single value from those on the five-hued flag that the Republic still maintains?"

For how quiet they were—no, because of how quiet they were—those words rang all the more bitter. Freedom and equality. Brotherhood and justice and nobility. Does a country that interns and discriminates against humans for no justifiable reason, that caused the deaths of untold millions without even a sliver of shame...have a right to adhere to that national creed?

The Republic had died years ago, by its own hand. It died the moment its citizens decided to prosecute their brethren. Perhaps Shin could hear this voice, too... The voice of the giant ghost of the Republic that hadn't yet realized it was already dead.

Having lost all words, Lena fell silent. After leaving Lena to her moment of pause, Shin spoke. With that same detached tone as ever, he declared the fact he knew to be true.

"You're going to lose this war, Major."

You, he said. Not *we*.

"...What do you mean?"

"Like I've said, the Legion are at no risk of shutting down because of their central processors. As far as I've seen, the Legion's numbers may not be growing, but they're not shrinking, either... But what about the Eighty-Six? How many of us are left?"

Lena couldn't answer. She didn't know. The Republic didn't keep track of those statistics.

"I think that in two to three years, we'll all be gone. The people in the internment camps aren't allowed to reproduce, and most of those who were infants when the internment happened have died by now."

The adults all died within the first three years of the war. Those who agreed to enlist died on the battlefield, and those who didn't were sent to the Gran Mule, where they worked in forced labor so rigorous and harsh it almost seemed like it was designed solely to work them to death. They all perished, leaving behind only the elderly and the sick, who all passed away over these nine years.

"...Why did...the babies die...?"

"Do you know how high the mortality rate among infants in an environment without medical care becomes...? When I was in the internment camps, almost none of the babies survived the first winter. I'm pretty sure it was the same everywhere else. And any that survived were probably sold off."

"Sold off?"

"Yes, some of the soldiers and the Eighty-Six sold them for profit. I'm not sure if it was for straight-up money or for goods, though."

Immediately realizing the implication, Lena felt all the color drain from her face. In other words, there were citizens in the Republic who, despite despising the Eighty-Six as pigs, had used those pigs' babies as slaves or lived by having those infants' organs transplanted into them.

And that left only the children. They were being sent to the battlefield, and very soon, none would remain as well.

"The Legion's numbers aren't diminishing. But the Eighty-Six will go extinct soon. And when we do, will you Alba fight? When you don't know how to fight, when none of you knows the battlefield, after you shoved conscription and war expenditures on the Eighty-Six...would you be able to keep fighting after we're gone?"

You wouldn't— She could tell there was a faint smile on Shin's lips. It was different from a victim's sneer that laughed at a much-deserved punishment. It was a smile that mocked an unsightly creature that only kept its eyes fixed on its own benefit and shut itself off from reality, lingering in transient peace until it eventually lost the means to defend itself.

"If no one will volunteer to fight, you'll have to resort to compulsory conscription. But a democratic country can only do that when the enemy is right in front of them,

and by the time that happens, it'll be too late... The fact that it can't reach a decision until the situation has already become critical is modern democracy's greatest flaw."

The veritable catastrophe easily came to mind. Faced with that nightmarish image, Lena shook her head in protest. There was no basis for her denial; she simply couldn't accept the truth thrust before her, the doom awaiting them in just a few years.

"B-but the number of Legion we've observed has definitely been decreasing! They've already been reduced to half of what they were a few years ago—"

"To the extent of what you can observe, correct? You have no way of confirming anything about the Legion that lurk in the depths of the contested zones, where the Eintagsfliege's jamming is constant... True, the Legion on the front lines have diminished, but that's only because they don't need to deploy any more than that. All they have to do is launch attacks that gradually wear us down, and the rest can hang back in the rear. And their numbers are only growing, even now."

That pattern of behavior could mean only one thing. They were preserving and reinforcing their troops. Eventually, they'd stop this war of attrition and go on a general offensive to shatter the Republic's defensive lines in one fell swoop.

"But the Legion couldn't have had the intelligence to come up with a strategy tha—"

"They *shouldn't* have had it. And that's the other reason you'll lose."

In contrast to Lena's increasingly panicked demeanor, Shin's was, as always, calm to the point of rudeness.

"Even if dead bodies with their heads intact are rare, this is a battlefield where corpses are left uncollected. A battlefield where millions have died. The Legion must have gotten their claws on more than a few... And a human mind can easily come up with the idea of bolstering its forces before going on the offensive. So what would happen if the Legion became equally intelligent?"

"...!"

The Black Sheep. Legion that had adopted the brain structure of humans, which, even in a decayed state, was still more far efficient than their central processors had ever been. So what would happen if they acquired brains that had only just died and had not yet decayed?

"We call those Legion Shepherds. The Legion were originally just soldiers acting on preprogrammed commands, but the Shepherds can lead them. They're the ghosts' commanders. We've already encountered a few of them, and forces led by them are so much harder to beat than those that aren't. There's simply no comparison."

"Wait. So this isn't theoretical—they actually exist? So does that mean you can—?"

"Yes, I can tell them apart by their voices. The commanders' voices are especially clear, so I can distinguish them even within an army. There are a few dozen on every front, and here in the first ward—there's one."

For a moment, Shin's voice grew much darker. Right, just like the time he'd told her with the coldness of a drawn blade that he was looking for his dead brother. A presence of chilling, sharp madness.

Lena was terrified. The Republic would fall to ruin, disarmed and helpless due to its own foolishness. It had used up the millions of lives it sent onto the battlefield to be dragged down by the ghosts of the Eighty-Six they never allowed to be buried.

"B-but..."

The words slipped through her lips before she even noticed.

"That's only if you die within the next few years... Right?"

She could feel Shin blinking a few times.

"That's...true."

"Then we simply have to defeat the Legion before that happens. If we had all of you... Wouldn't it be possible with the Spearhead squadron, who can tell where the Legion will attack?"

If we had the elites who'd survived fight after fight against the most dangerous of Legion and came back relatively unscathed...

"If we could get the necessary personnel, equipment, and time, it should be possible, yes. That's true for all wars."

"Then let's win this war! I'll...do everything I can, too."

She wanted to say that she would fight with them but realized that was probably more than she deserved.

"I'll put every effort into making sure you win. Whether it's analyzing the enemy's movements or coming up with strategies, I'll do anything I can... and I'll try to make it so the same happens across all the other fronts."

If they could track the enemy's movements, it should be possible to create a strategy to keep them in check. That would definitely be in the Republic's interest. It shouldn't be too hard to explain that to Command and have it applied to other squadrons as well.

"You end your service this year, right, Captain Nouzen? In that case, you have to keep winning until then... Let's survive this war. Both of us."

Shin smiled wryly. It had a faint, gentle feeling to it.

"...Yes. Let's."

Severing the Resonance with Lena, Shin walked back through the darkness of the slumbering barracks to his room. Entering the dimly lit space, he looked at his own moonlit image reflected in the window's glass. He had worn that blue scarf to battle, but he couldn't sleep with it on, of course. He'd planned to turn in right after the shower, so the faint-blue fabric that always covered his neck above his battle-worn uniform wasn't there.

His physique seemed scrawny at first glance but was, in fact, tempered by years of rigorous life on the battlefield, and his throat bore a scar that encircled his neck in a red line. That line wasn't straight but jagged and blood colored—the red remnants of vascular congestion, as if his head had once been wrung off and then stitched back into place.

Shin calmly reached out his hand and gently touched the scar on the neck of his reflection.

INTERLUDE

THE HEADLESS KNIGHT II

Raiden first met the Reaper in a unit he'd been assigned to half a year after he'd enlisted. It was the day after the last of the friends with whom he'd enlisted had died.

Before enlisting, Raiden was given refuge in the eighty-five Sectors, in a boarding school run by an old woman. Her only students were kids who lived in the neighborhood, and so the dorms were used to hide and shelter as many Eighty-Six children as possible. After the fifth year, someone had apparently reported them to the authorities, and soldiers arrived to escort them away. The old woman hounded them relentlessly, beseeching their consciences and senses of justice time and time again, but her pleas were answered only by sneers and derision.

Without a hint of guilt in their expressions, the soldiers herded the children onto a truck used for transporting livestock, and Raiden's last memory of the old woman was how she had chased after the truck, shouting at the soldiers.

He had never heard her swear before. That respectable, strict old lady who always got frighteningly angry whenever Raiden and the others jokingly cursed screamed at the retreating truck with her face twisted in rage as tears streamed down her cheeks.

"I hope you burn in hell, you filthy bastards!"

He could remember the image of her crouching down on the road and the sound of her heartrending wails and weeping as clearly now as if hearing them then.

The captain who bore the name of the Reaper was more careless and whimsical than anyone Raiden had ever known. He would never go on patrols and instead went loitering in ruins where the Legion could very well be hiding. He would issue orders to deploy when the radar gave no indication of an enemy advance. And while his predictions were so spot-on it was creepy, Raiden could only see his carelessness as the actions of someone suicidal.

He couldn't suppress his anger. The friends who'd enlisted with him fought so hard, but all they got in return for their courage and efforts was death. The old woman had protected Raiden and the other children, even though she could well have been shot for her actions. And this idiot just insisted on acting this way, as if he didn't care if they all died—as if he didn't care if he himself died.

Raiden finally lost his patience and hit him half a year after joining the squadron. It happened when they were arguing over the patrols Shin kept canceling. Even though Raiden should've taken it easy on him, considering how different they were in terms of physique, he'd struck Shin, who was still relatively small at the time, with enough force to knock him back. He'd shouted at Shin, who'd been sprawled on the ground, to stop fucking with them, but those red eyes had remained as calm and unwavering as ever.

"It's my fault for not explaining, but still."

Shin spat out the blood in his mouth as he rose to his feet. He seemed to have taken surprisingly little damage, and his movements were without a hint of sluggishness or hesitation.

"Speaking from experience, no one believes me even when I tell them, so I stopped trying to explain it. I'm tired of wasting my time."

"Huh? What the fuck are you talking about?"

"I'll tell you eventually... Also—"

Shin punched Raiden right in the face. That blow, which carried all the power his small body could muster, was incredibly painful. It was a swing that made perfect use of his weight, his momentum, and the transmission of force in his fist and left Raiden lying helplessly on the floor with his head spinning.

"I never said you could punch me. I don't know how to hold back, but if that doesn't bother you, feel free to come at me anytime."

Filled with even more anger hearing this taunt, Raiden lunged at him again. Put bluntly, Raiden lost that terribly one-sided fight. Shin, who'd spent a year longer than Raiden on the battlefield, was that much more accustomed to violence and adept at employing it.

Raiden still couldn't stand the prick, but his impression toward Shin changed a bit. When Theo heard the story years later, he sighed in exasperation and said that kind of backstory wouldn't even fly in a kids' comic. But the truth was, Theo was the one who didn't understand. Shin had looked like he was holding in a smile back then, but hell, if only Raiden had known what was going through that nutcase's head.

The day after they fought, Shin said—through cut and bruised lips—that he'd eventually explain everything. And on their next deployment, Raiden could hear the ghosts' wailing. It was then that Raiden finally realized why Shin was so opposed to going on patrols... Why he was so detached in a way a boy his age should never be.



The Spearhead squadron's members were fast asleep after that day's lights out. Raiden was lying on his bunk but hadn't yet drifted off. Hearing quiet footsteps outside, he rose from his bed. Looking through the adjacent door, which had been left open, he found Shin standing in his dark room, basking in the pale-blue moonlight.

“Were you talking to someone before?”

From his vantage in the changing room, Raiden had thought he'd heard Shin talking to someone in the shower. Shin simply turned his gaze in Raiden's direction and nodded. His indifferent, frozen red eyes bespoke a calmness that never seemed to jibe with his age and an apathy that had seemed nearly unshakable.

“It was the major. She Resonated with me for a bit earlier.”

“...So she actually synced up with you again. Color me surprised. The girl's got more guts than I gave her credit for.”

He was a bit impressed. No other Handler had ever agreed to Resonate with Shin after hearing the voices. His eyes were drawn to Shin's now exposed neck, where a single red scar was etched unevenly across his throat. Raiden already knew the origins of that decapitation-like scar, having heard it from Shin himself, including the fact that he'd gained the ability to hear the ghosts as a consequence of it.

It was a quiet night. At least, it was for Raiden. But for Shin... For his comrade, afflicted with the capacity to hear the ghosts' cries, this was yet another night filled with the wails and lamentations of the dead. No one could maintain his equilibrium which being subjected to this incessant torment. His emotions were constantly being battered and eroded, until eventually, he became the emotionless, detached, unfeeling Reaper that he was.

With his red eyes, the Reaper looked at Raiden. Those eyes, the color of fresh blood, had all but frozen over. His heart was still on the battlefield, always on the battlefield, obsessively seeking its head in the faraway front, longing to regain what it had lost.

“I'm going to sleep. If you have anything to say, we can talk tomorrow.”

“...Yeah, sorry.”

Even after he'd closed the uneven door after a bit of a struggle and heard Raiden's footsteps in the hallway and the sound of the pipe bed creaking, Shin had remained at the window, basking in the moonlight, his eyes still looking toward the battlefield. If he listened carefully, he could make out the murmuring of the flock of ghosts on the other side of the dark night, their whispers like the stirring of stardust from the heavens above. Their moans and screams, their laments and shrieks.

He made out the sound of mechanical words and concentrated only on that, focusing his consciousness on that distant cry. How long had it been since he'd heard that voice speaking to him as a man? It must have been eight years. And the words it spoke now were the same as back then.

Every night, he heard it, and each time, that memory was resurrected. That voice loomed over him like an ever-present shadow, never allowing him to forget it. The pressure squeezing down on his throat, threatening to crush his neck. Those black eyes hidden behind his glasses, glaring down at him with palpable hatred. The suffocation and suffering—and his brother's voice, cutting into his very ears with its wrath.

It's in your name. Fitting. It's all your fault. All of it—everything is your fault.

That same voice was calling for him in the distance. Always, ever since that day five years ago when he died here, in a forsaken corner of the ruins on the eastern front. Shin placed his hand against the cold glass and whispered, even though he knew his words wouldn't reach anyone.

"I'll come for you soon—Brother."

CHAPTER 5

FUCKIN' GLORY TO THE SPEARHEAD SQUADRON

There were many Black Sheep in the battle that day as well, and once the fighting ended, Lena took long, hard breaths, desperately fighting the urge to vomit. With the battle concluded, the Processors gradually shut down their Para-RAIDs as they made their way back, but Lena was surprised to find someone still connected.

"If it's that hard on you, just quit already."

Kurena's voice was curt, making it abundantly clear she wasn't speaking out of concern.

"We don't care one way or another if you're here, and you commanding us doesn't change much in the long run. If anything, having you freak out over the line when you're not even here is just distracting."

That she was right annoyed Lena, but she was happy Kurena spoke to her, even if it was just to hurl that bit of abuse her way. Coming to her senses, Lena asked:

"Isn't it hard on you, too...?"

Kurena and the others never cut the line, even if the voices were agonizing. Shin's infallible ability to always know where the Legion were and where they'd strike was invaluable on the battlefield, but that didn't have to extend to the rest of the squadron. She felt Kurena shrug.

"Not really. We're used to it, and even without Shin around projecting them, Processors like us get to hear plenty of screams of agony."

In contrast to her indifferent attitude, there was a definite shiver of emotion in Kurena's tone. It wasn't fear, but anger, regret, and bitterness... Dark sentiments.

"Blowing up along with your rig and dying an instant death is probably the best way to go that we can hope for. We've all seen too many friends have their limbs ripped off, or their faces scraped off, or every inch of their bodies burned to ash, or their stomachs ripped open so their guts spill out. Compared to that, the voices really aren't anything special."

But Lena could tell that, contrary to what she was trying to project, Kurena was suffering. As if holding back pain. As if holding back tears. She could tell this girl was standing on that distant battlefield, biting her lip in frustration. She could feel her teeth grating.

"It's just as true in the first ward... No matter who dies, none of us can see it as unusual anymore."

"...Right."

Though the Spearhead squadron had originally had twenty-four members, they'd lost someone else the other day, cutting their ranks to thirteen.

Raiden tossed the broken radio, which would probably never get repaired, into the factory's recycling furnace.

While they all hung around the room as a group, Lena connected via the Para-RAID as always, in the same hour, gently bidding them a good evening.

"We're hearing you loud and clear, Major... Sorry in advance for the sausage fest."

Lena seemed rather surprised, which was understandable, given that it was Raiden—not Shin, the usual suspect—who answered her first.

"...Hmm, did something happen to Captain Nouzen?"

Theo scoffed at her words, his sketchbook in hand.

"Did anyone ever tell you you're as stiff as a board, Major Milizé? You know our ranks are pretty much just for show."

The squadron's leader was a captain, followed by his vice captain, who was a lieutenant; the platoon leaders, who were second lieutenants; and then the platoon members, who were ensigns. They were given ranks in order to clarify the chain of command in the squadron, but no one received the authority, treatment, or salary their rank should have afforded them. All the Processors in the squadron were Name Bearers who were captains and vice captains in their former squadrons, so depending on their assignment, many were "demoted" from captain to lieutenant to second lieutenant, all the way down to ensign.

Lena's answer, however, was cut-and-dried. Raiden was amused by how brazen she'd become lately.

"You and Lieutenant Shuga still call me Major, don't you, Second Lieutenant Rikka? I don't see what's wrong with me referring to you the same way."

"...True enough," Theo said with a smirk.

She had said they could call her Lena, but no one did. Realizing the reserved intention behind that, Lena insisted on standing on ceremony, addressing them as her subordinates, as well. Even if they were talking, theirs wasn't the sort of relationship where they could call one another by name. It was an unseen line they'd agreed to draw, because any attempt at appearing friendly would be a farce, since no matter what, their relationship was one of oppressor and oppressed.

"...So did anything happen to the captain? Don't tell me something happened during today's battle..."

"Oh, no, nothing like that."

Raiden found his gaze wandering to the wall separating his room from the adjacent one. Everyone except Anju and Kurena had gathered with him.

However, it wasn't Shin's room as usual, but Raiden's. Not a single sound could be heard from Shin's room, which was one thin wall removed.

"He's just asleep. He's exhausted."

He'd already started dozing off by the time they had dinner, and when Raiden finished cleanup duty and checked his room, Shin was sprawled out on the bed. Raiden had simply picked up the kitten, who mewled its discontent; placed a thin blanket over Shin; and left the room as quietly as he could. Shin may have said he was used to it, but hearing the Legion every waking—and non-waking—moment did weigh on him.

Since they Resonated with him at a minimal synchronization rate, what they could hear didn't match precisely what Shin was hearing, so Raiden and the others had no way of knowing what kind of hell Shin was living in. All they knew was that there had once been a Handler who'd Resonated with Shin with the synchronization rate set to maximum who'd committed suicide immediately thereafter.

Said Handler had been the kind of scum who enjoyed torturing his Processors by giving them absurd orders that would end up getting them killed and fooling inexperienced newcomers, sending them to their deaths. Shin had said he was annoying and a nuisance and told everyone else not to Resonate with him during the next battle, so the only one connecting to him would be the Handler. The Handler never connected again after that battle, and the next day, the MPs arrived and told them he had killed himself. Whatever had driven that Handler to suicide, that was the world in which Shin lived. To top it off, recent events within the Spearhead squadron had been hard on him, too.

"...I'm sure it's the same for the captain, but the burden on all of you has been increasing lately... And with you going on one mission after another, more and more of you have been dying in action..."

"...Yeah."

He could only utter a brief affirmative to Lena's lamentation. It wasn't just Shin. The whole squadron was exhausted as battles had become more frequent and much harsher. The Spearhead squadron had numbered twenty-four Processors when first established and had since lost eleven members. It had already been reduced by nearly half, and any other squadron would have been considered annihilated and had its members reassigned to other units by now.

The frequency of their sorties against the Legion weren't decreasing, but the number of units they had was, which meant the individual strain on each and every one of them was gradually growing. They were rapidly approaching a state where they didn't have enough hands on deck to handle the enemy forces' size, and fatigue was causing them to make blunders and misjudgments. It was a vicious downward spiral where the lack of personnel was only causing further deaths.

And in spite of that, they still hadn't even received replacements to fill in for Kujo's group, the first three who'd died in February. Lena bit her lip and said encouragingly:

"I'll have them hurry up with the reinforcements. I'll do anything I can to have them prioritize this place when it comes to sending in new Processors."

Haruto threw a glance in his direction. Raiden exhaled heavily.

"Yeah. You do that."

"This squadron is guarding a crucial defensive position. We should have a right to be prioritized when it comes to restocking and personnel. For the time being, I'll petition for other nearby units to give you reinforcements... So please just hold on a little bit longer."

"...Yeah."

He gave her a vague, noncommittal nod. At the edge of his vision, he could see Theo and Haruto shrug despondently.

"Hey, Anju... You know..."

Only Kurena and Anju were in the shower room. Kurena's prompt came as she poured hot water over Anju, who was diligently washing her silver hair.

"Hmm?"

"I think we should stop talking to her already."

Anju glanced at her happily for some reason.

"Are you that worried about the major?"

"Tch."

Kurena shook her head, flustered. What the hell was she saying?!

"As if! Why should I care about that woman?! ...I just thought we owed her that much because she wasn't afraid of Shin."

She grumpily mumbled that last line in a whisper. She still hated her. Her platitudes still made Kurena sick to her stomach. But if nothing else, she could at least respect the fact that she hadn't treated their friend like a monster.

"Shin and Raiden, neither of them want to tell her. No one does. And if someone told her, she wouldn't bother Resonating with us anymore. We'd all be better off for it."

"That's right... Kaie did say that, remember?"

You're not a bad person...so you shouldn't be involved with us.

"But I think that's why Shin and Raiden aren't telling her. They probably think it would only hurt her."

"..."

Kaie was gone now. She would always get embarrassed over her curveless physique in the shower, and the other girls would poke fun at her. That small girl, lithe as a cat. The other girls who always squealed over topics they could never discuss with boys. They were all gone. And now they were the only two left. At first, there had been six girls in the squadron, but everyone except Kurena and Anju had died in battle.

Suddenly realizing something, Kurena lifted her gaze.

"Say, Anju..."

"Hmm?"

"Is it really okay...?"

Anju's hands, which were busy tending to her hair, stopped. She shrugged. It was the first time Kurena had showered with Anju in the year they'd known each other. Anju had never let anyone in the squadron see her naked, not even other girls.

"Yeah. After all this time, it should be okay... I figured there was no hiding it now, when we're the only two left."

Her white, exposed skin was visible through the wet, transparent gauze. While both her and Kurena's flesh had no shortage of scars, old and new, there were several conspicuous scars on Anju's back that didn't seem to be the result of combat. Kurena averted her eyes from a scar that looked like letters etched into Anju's back, which peeked from where her long hair parted, but could still make out the words *whore's daughter*.

Anju had thick Alba blood running through her veins. Meanwhile, her Caerulea blood came from a distant ancestor.

"You know, Daiya, he... When we first met, he said my hair was pretty. He could tell I was growing it out to hide something, but he said it was pretty and that I should let it grow."

Serene at first, halfway through, her voice cracked, despite all her efforts to maintain her composure. Her pale lips quivered like some helpless creature as she tried to force a smile onto her face.

"And now Daiya's gone. So I thought that worrying about this any longer would be pointless..."

Kurena thought she would cry, but Anju kept it together. She combed her wet hair back, and by the time she turned to look at Kurena, her usual gentle smile graced her kind face again.

"What about you, Kurena? Don't you want to tell him?"

She didn't say what or specify whom. There was no need. Kurena cast down her gaze.

"...Yeah. I just don't think I have the right to say it."

When she was first assigned under him, she was honestly afraid. She'd always heard the rumors about the headless, red-eyed Reaper who dominated the eastern front lines. Name Bearers were those who lived while their companions died around them, as if they were drinking the blood of their fellow soldiers to survive. That's why when someone received this dreaded second name, it was usually one that stressed this dangerous, terrifying nature.

But even among other Name Bearers, Shin's stood out. The Undertaker. A name fitting the one who always stood closest to death but never died, always burying someone. The Reaper who knew the battlefield better than anyone. Rumor had it that any who fought in the same squadron—except the one who went by the name of a werewolf—would inevitably die. Perhaps

he summoned death, just like his name implied. Or perhaps he used his comrades as shields.

The fact that he had always fought in the contested zones, where the fighting was fiercest, ever since his first squad assignment, was something Kurena only learned many operations later. One of her comrades had their lower half blown off by a self-propelled mine. They were in terrible agony but didn't die, and no one could think of what to do. Only Shin knelt down next to them. Kurena had tried to go, too, but Raiden stopped her.

Kurena had watched blankly as Shin pulled out a pistol. They carried guns for self-defense and on the off chance that suicide would be necessary. It was only then, though, that she learned there was another reason.

I know it's hard, but you have to do it. Try remembering a time when you were happy.

A smile played on their dying comrade's agonized face. Their lips shivered as they whispered, *Hey.*

Promise me... You'll take me with you, right...?

Yeah.

Shin caressed the poor soul's face with a hand slick with blood, viscera, and debris, his expression as stoic and composed as ever. It was the single most beautiful yet solemn sight Kurena had ever seen. She finally realized why Raiden and some of their squad mates sometimes called him "our Reaper."

He would carry them. The names of their dead companions, their hearts and souls. Never neglecting or leaving anyone behind, he would carry them with him until he reached his final destination. It was the most noble, irreplaceable salvation the Processors could ever hope to receive. They who lived on a battlefield where tomorrow wasn't guaranteed, knowing a grave would never be prepared for them. She yearned for him. From the bottom of her heart. Even if she died, knowing that he would take her with him made her happy and washed away the terror.

It was then that she began polishing her skill with a gun, which was already considerably above average. So that the next time something like that happened, she would be strong enough to do *that* by herself. And also, because even if she was destined to die someday, she wanted to be able to fight even just a bit longer.

But...

Twisting the faucet to turn off the shower, Kurena looked up. She knew, at the very least, that it could never be her. So long as they were on this battlefield, she could never do that. She could never be like their Reaper, who would take them and all their fallen comrades, their hearts, to his final destination.

But if Shin would take their hearts, who would take his...?



“Hey, Eighty-Six. Over here, too.”

Once a month, goods that couldn't be made in the automatic factory or the production plant were delivered to them via airplane from beyond the wall. The transport personnel, who accompanied Shin as he signed the receipt and compared the inventory list with the container's contents, raised his haughty, arrogant voice.

This officer, who was visibly scrawny and seedy-looking even despite his uniform, was accompanied by two soldiers armed with assault rifles, which they likely carried only to intimidate and threaten him. That was fine, but one soldier in the back still had the safety on his rifle, which probably wasn't even loaded to begin with. They were all standing too close to Shin, who could probably have disarmed them all before one could even think of pulling the trigger. Not that he would do that, though. There was no point.

“It's from your Handler. She said it's some special warhead you requested. To hell with her, making us go through this much trouble for a bunch of pigs...”

Behind the officer stood a sturdy munitions container, rigorously sealed and bearing warnings alerting that it was filled with explosive ammunition. Shin raised an eyebrow, confused. He didn't recall asking for anything like that.

Seeing Shin's silence, the officer's lips curled in a vulgar smirk. There were a lot of filthy, rebellious Eighty-Six who didn't know their place, but this one was surprisingly docile. He wouldn't bite, no matter what you said to him.

“Your master's a chick, right? How'd you butter her up? Probably didn't take more than a few words to get that dainty little princess wet.”

Shin's gaze suddenly fixed on the officer.

“Shall I demonstrate on your wife? I'm pretty sure she's bored stiff at night anyway.”

“You mother—”

The officer was consumed by rage but froze up once he locked eyes with Shin. Those red eyes were perfectly sedate, without so much as a hint of a threat, but a pig who'd spent his life in the safety of his sty had no chance of beating a beast with skills honed on the battlefield. Slipping past the stiffened officer's side, Shin approached the munitions container. Sure enough, its number appeared on the inventory list, and Lena's signature, with which he had grown familiar over the last several weeks, was scrawled over its delivery stamp. Below that, two words had been inscribed with a pen.

“Palace Luñè...?”

And after a moment's reflection, Shin's eyes widened with surprise.

†

Parties were a social gathering, which, in other words, meant they were a place for gathering information and making contacts. And while she was aware that not all the interactions there could be reduced to such refined, trivial subjects as music, art, and philosophy, the fact remained that this boring place was undeniably...well, boring.

Escaping the countless greedy whispers that filled Palace Perle's luxurious banquet hall, Lena sighed in relief as she took refuge on a starlit terrace. She wasn't usually one for these kinds of parties, and tonight the place seemed almost deliberately rife with conversations appropriate for her age as well as young men with ulterior motives. The Milizé family was originally a house of wealthy nobles, which meant quite a few had their gazes fixed on her pedigree and wealth.

However, none was brave enough to approach Lena today, it seemed. While her black silk dress wasn't exactly against the party's dress code, the combination of a black dress and white ornamental flowers was more befitting a funeral than a social gathering. And to top it off, she refused to drink or initiate conversation and was generally ignored by the other ladies in the hall save for the occasional annoyed glance thrown her way. The only ones who spoke to her other than Annette, who approached her with an exasperated expression, and Karlstahl, who engaged her with a somewhat worried look in his eyes, were a few older ladies with flowers blooming on their heads (quite literally) who complimented her on her lovely choker—her RAID Device.

Admittedly, she was aware of how rude she was probably being, but that didn't mean she had any intentions of playing along. They were all closing their eyes to reality in this small world they'd built for themselves, distracting themselves in the pursuit of pride, lust, and riches. It was all too shallow and far too foolish. Especially after countless Processors had died one after another to make this possible...

Suddenly, her RAID Device activated.

"...Major?"

"Captain Nouzen... What is it?"

She replied in a whisper, pinning her RAID Device's earpiece against her ear immediately. They weren't scheduled for any sorties at this time of day, but was it possible a force so large that the second squadron wasn't able to handle it had emerged...?

But there was no hint of stress in Shin's voice.

"I Resonated since you didn't connect at the usual time. Was that all right? If now isn't a good time, I can call tomorrow—"

"Now is fine. What's up?"

Come to think of it, this was right around when she'd usually be talking to the Spearhead squadron. She turned her back to the party, as she would when talking on the phone.

"I received the special warhead you sent us, so I wanted to contact you about it."

Flowers of sparks and flames bloomed brilliantly, helping the stars illuminate the dark night sky. Beautiful shades of chemical fire sparkled in transient light before raining down as glittering embers like snow from the sky. Then the next flower took to the skies, whizzing in the opposite direction with a thunderous *bang*.

Each time one took to the air, it was accompanied by cheering filled with the kind of elation normally reserved for children. It was only natural, since the majority hadn't seen anything like this since they were kids. Their figures were mesmerized by the firelight for a brief moment, but soon enough, their shadows began dancing in the afterglow.

Doing this in the base was, of course, prohibited, so everyone moved to an abandoned soccer stadium in one of the ruins. The troops and maintenance crew had scattered across the stadium overrun by weeds, with the Juggernauts casting their shadows solemnly around them. Fido had carried the maintenance crew over and then gone on to diligently set up the launching tubes, bustling to and fro as it used a burner meant for cutting through metal in place of a lighter to ignite the fuses.

Observing from the periphery inside Undertaker, which stood on standby, Shin looked up as yet another firework zipped into the air.

"—Thank you for the fireworks."

The synchronization rate was a bit higher than usual, allowing Lena to just barely make out the cheers of the other squad members. Realizing he'd increased the rate so she'd be able to hear them filled Lena with joy.

"It's the Revolution Festival, after all. You watched it once with your brother and parents, didn't you? I'm sure everyone else has their own memories."

It had been a short while since she sent them the fireworks, which she'd bought in town. As the festival approached, shops would sell these skyrocket fireworks in bulk. She'd had to send the commissary official a bottle of expensive wine and fake the label on the container she'd loaded them in. These were, after all, combustibles that would be carried by plane, so she'd registered it as a munitions container. She'd never had a high opinion of bribery, but considering how she'd managed to force everything to go her way, she was certainly impressed with its effectiveness.

"This was Revolution Festival tradition, right...? Can you see any of the presidential office's fireworks from there?"

"Let me see..."

She walked across the terrace, facing in the presidential office's direction. It seemed they had just started. The Republic's anthem was playing from loudspeakers, and beautiful flowers in five colors adorned the sky. Looking up at the expertly crafted fireworks, Lena smiled sadly.

"I can see them, yes, but the sky's too bright."

The lights from the town's parties and festivities were simply too strong. The air of the town, which consumed electricity without any qualms, was far

too polluted. These beautiful fireworks, which stood to represent the Republic's dignity and honor, were terribly hazy.

There was probably no one in this party's vicinity who even bothered to look at the display. Even though they were prettier than the ones sold in the market and no doubt made by the hands of skilled craftsmen, no one in this city could appreciate how rare this sight was.

"I'm sure the fireworks over there are beautiful. The night is dark, and the air must be clear, too."

Indeed, the night was dark, the air was clear, and so many people were gazing up at them intently. The fireworks in that small corner of the battlefield must have been so beautiful. Lena had to stop herself from wishing out loud that she could be there with them. It wasn't a sentiment acceptable for her to express.

In truth, if Lena wished it, she could go there as often as she pleased. But they, on the other hand, never wanted to be on that battlefield in the first place. And she couldn't take Shin and the others back with her. Any time spent with them would be a fleeting illusion, so it wasn't a desire she could share. Instead she said:



"Let's all watch the fireworks in the First Sector someday. I'm sure you'll all laugh at how bad it is."

She felt Shin smile wryly.

"I don't remember it being that bad."

"Then come see it for yourself and find out if you remember correctly or not. Once the war ends and you're all discharged, we can see them together."

She then remembered, and her voice faltered. Daiya. And the other six who'd gradually perished.

"I wish I could have shown this to Second Lieutenant Irma and the others, too... Oh, I'm sorry. Me and my bad timing again..."

"Don't be. I think Daiya and the others would be happy if they knew they were the first of us to ever get a funeral artillery salute. They all hated it when everyone got mopey and melancholic."

Kino and the others seemed to be genuinely enjoying themselves, and she could make out their laughter. Shin himself must have felt something, too, because she could feel the undulations of his emotions a bit more clearly.

"And Anju finally cried a bit earlier, too. She tends to keep everything bottled up... So that's another thing for me to be thankful for."

"..."

Daiya and Anju seemed to have gotten along really well and had apparently been friends for a very long time.

"I'm sure Ensign Emma will never forget him..."

"That holds true for all of us. Just like you could never forget...my brother."

He paused, apparently hesitant to finish that sentence, but eventually, he continued.

"It made me happy knowing that... I could never remember him, myself."

Hearing that subtle shiver in his voice, Lena could hardly contain her disbelief. She had never heard Shin bare his feelings so openly before.

"Captain Nouzen..."

"Major. Could you please...never forget us?"

Shin had probably intended this as a joke. His voice and tone were, in fact, just a bit flippant. But through the Sensory Resonance, which was set higher than usual, she could make it out. Subtle as it was. Lena could feel the fervent wish that lay behind those words.

If we die. Even for just a short while, could you...?

Lena closed her eyes. No matter how strong they were. Even if they had lived through more battlefields than they could count. Even still, death always seemed to be looming over them.

"Of course I will... But..."

She took a sharp breath, declaring it clearly. That was her task—the duty of Spearhead squadron's Handler, Vladilena Milizé.

"...before that, I won't let you die. Not one of you, not anymore."

However, no matter how much Lena appealed for Processors to replace those who had fallen, no matter how many times she petitioned for it, no reinforcements were dispatched for the Spearhead squadron.

†

When they went into battle that day, four more died.

It was a standard raid on a Legion advance force. The enemy vanguard maintained a foothold, but that was a decoy. The position seemed defenseless but was actually surrounded by forces lying in ambush. Sensing the position and numbers of the enemies in the impact point ahead of time as always, Shin had planned to detour around the ambush's front and strike them from the flank.

For some reason, the Eintagsfliege didn't deploy, and Lena didn't detect any more bogeys on the radar screen, but just before they made contact with the enemy, Shin and a few others felt something. Raiden whispered something about having a bad feeling, which was what they all must have felt and was probably what had kept them alive for so long. A warrior's sense of smell, of sorts, an ability that stood head-to-head with Shin's power to hear the ghosts.

Something fell diagonally from the heavens, and the moment it impacted, the radar blared up with a warning siren.

Those who'd remained vigilant—and subconsciously prepped themselves in a position that would allow them to react to any situation—survived. Griffin, who had failed to dodge in time, took a direct hit and was blown away, and Fafnir, who'd been too close to the impact point, was pelted with shrapnel and downed immediately. All the other units were knocked away by the powerful shock waves and lost their balance, which was when the second and third shells rained down in an intense bombardment.

The support computer reverse calculated the firing position to 120 kilometers east-northeast. Such a long-distance artillery barrage from the Legion had never been recorded. Moreover, the shells traveled at unbelievable speeds. Their initial velocity was estimated at four thousand meters per second, exceeding the maximum range for artillery by a bit.

The ambush itself was a sacrificial pawn to lure the Spearhead squadron into the artillery fire's range. They had even predicted they would attack from the flank. It was a subtle, ruthless strategy, unlike anything the Legion had been known to be capable of before.

Had Shin not promptly identified and destroyed the Long-Range Observer Units that had witnessed the impact, and had the bombardment not stopped after ten shells because of some flaw in this new type, even elites like them might not have been able to retreat, resulting in complete destruction of the squadron.

And now, after they had shaken off the units in pursuit, the team had lost a total of four members. Chise, Kino, Kuroto, and Touma—KIA. A mere nine

Juggernauts remained. They had finally been reduced to less than half of their original numbers and were now down to single digits.

"I..."

Grasped by terror, Lena tried to speak. Her mouth was dry. An ominous image, a certain horrifying premonition jolted her. The words left her mouth as if she'd coughed them up.

"I'll have them send reinforcements. I'll make them commit right now—today. This can't... This is messed up...!"

The Spearhead squadron had been operating at half efficiency for weeks now. They didn't have enough soldiers or sufficient time to rest, and they had only just barely been able to hold the line by asking other units to send reinforcements and take over some of their sorties. HQ was fully aware of this but had done nothing. For some reason, they could ask other squadrons for help, but all requests to fill in for their missing ranks were ignored. She even bore the shame of exploiting her connections with Karlstahl to have him put in the requisition for her, but even a request from a commodore like him didn't bring a single bit of reinforcement to the Spearhead squadron.

Shin opened his mouth and said briefly:

"Major."

"I'll ask the Commodore again and have him vouch for us. And if that won't do, I'll do anything to—"

"Major Milizé."

At that second, slightly more forceful call, Lena fell silent.

"Everyone. We're all okay with this, right?"

"...Yeah."

Raiden agreed on the survivors' behalf. A heavy silence hung over everyone else.

"...What are you...?"

"You can stop now, Major. No matter what you do, it's all pointless now."

"What are you saying, Captain...?"

"Reinforcements won't come anymore. Not a single one. No matter what."

"...Huh...?"

And then Shin said it silently, declaring the truth they all knew but had never told Lena.

"We'll all be killed here. This squadron is our execution ground."

INTERLUDE

THE HEADLESS KNIGHT III

For as long as he could remember, he'd been able to hear the voices of his mother, brother, and others around him. They were voices that spoke without words and conveyed only kindness and affection. And that was why he thought to rely on someone he shouldn't have. That was the cause of everything that had happened.

His father passed away shortly after enlisting, and soon after, their mother left for the battlefield as well. Shin and his brother were given refuge in a church in a corner of the internment camp, where a priest took them in and raised them. The internment camp Shin was sent to was built on the remains of a village where the priest used to live.

Though an Adularia himself, the priest was greatly opposed to the Eighty-Six's internment. When the eighty-five Sectors' church refused to offer sanctuary to the Eighty-Six, the priest decided to stay alone behind the barbed wire fences of the internment camp.

He was shunned by the Eighty-Six for being an Alba but was a close friend of Shin's parents. So when the two were sent to the battlefield, the priest took their children in. If he hadn't, Shin and his brother might not have survived. There was great resentment in the internment camps toward Alba, as well as the descendants of the Empire that started the war. The two brothers, who had thick Imperial blood flowing through their veins, would have become outlets for that anger had it not been for the priest's protection.

It happened not long before Shin turned eight, on the night they received the notice that their mother had died on the battlefield. They were too far away to converse, but Shin could always feel his mother's and father's voices in the distance. But one night, their voices had vanished, and a few days later, the boys received a slip of paper telling them their parents had died.

Even though the note had informed him of their deaths, the words hardly conveyed any meaning to Shin. He had neither witnessed their final moments nor seen their remains, so the simple word *death* couldn't communicate the irreversible totality of this great loss to Shin's young, innocent mind.

He wasn't bereft or sad; he was just confused. Even if people told him his parents weren't coming back and that he'd never see them again, he couldn't understand why. The day she left, Mommy had smiled and patted

him on the head, telling him to be a good boy and to listen to his brother and the priest. Why wouldn't she come back? Try as he might to answer that question, he couldn't.

That's why he decided to ask his brother. Rei, who was ten years older, could do anything and knew everything. He always kept him safe and cherished Shin more than anything. So he would know about this, too. Rei was standing still in his dark room, with only the moonlight to illuminate him. Shin called out to his brother, who had his tall back to the door.

"Brother..."

Rei turned to look at him sluggishly. His black eyes were red and swollen with tears and filled with grief and indignation. But in contrast to that storm of emotion was a hollow gaze Shin had never seen on his brother's face, an expression that scared him a little.

"Brother... Where's Mommy?"

He felt as if something within those black eyes cracked. Still gaping at his brother's grief, still listening to his anguish, Shin continued.

"Isn't she coming back? Why...? Why did she...die?"

A heavy silence fell between them, as if something had snapped. Those deep-black, frozen eyes shattered, and a violent madness surged out from that crevice. The next moment, Shin had been grabbed by the throat and hurled against the wooden floor.

"Urk...!"

His lungs were being crushed, and the air trying to escape them was stuck in his strangled windpipe. His vision was going black from the lack of oxygen. His brother had mobilized all his weight and strength at Shin's throat, the pressure threatening to crush it. Rei's black eyes looked down at him from point-blank range, glittering with rage and hatred.

"It's your fault."

His voice escaped like a growl from between clenched teeth.

"Because you were there, Mom went to the battlefield. Mom died because of you. *You killed Mom!*"

If only you weren't around.

Shin could hear his brother's voice piercing that thunderous cry. It was like hellfire, like a blade, a raw thought incapable of hiding anything for its purity. That thought stabbed into his mind mercilessly like a dagger.

I wish you were never here. I wish you'd never been born. Might as well fix that now. Disappear from this world.

Die.

"Sin. It's in your name. Fitting. It's all your fault. All of it—everything is your fault! Mom dying, that I'm going to die—all of it—it's all because of your sin!"

He was terrified. Of his brother's screaming. Of his brother's voice. But he couldn't move or plug his ears. So Shin escaped from that place. Beyond the depths of his heart, deeper than the furthest reaches of his soul, the

innermost place where his parents had gone. His consciousness shut down silently, and everything faded into black and dissipated.

When Shin woke up, he was lying in his bed, with only the priest sitting next to him. He said everything was all right now. Rei wasn't there. It seemed he was still in the church, but he wouldn't meet Shin even once. In the meantime, Rei had finished the protocols for enlistment and left the church a few days later. The priest escorted him out, as if trying to hide his back. His brother refused to spare Shin a final look or even a word of farewell. He was probably still angry, and Shin was afraid to say anything, for fear he'd just get mad at him again.

And so Rei left, neither of them saying anything until the end. It was then that Shin stopped hearing his brother's voice, which he'd always been able to hear before, and on the rare occasions Shin mustered the courage to call out to him, no response ever came. He eventually had no choice but to accept that his brother hadn't forgiven him... That his brother never would.

It was also around the time his brother left him with this scar that Shin realized he could hear those voices, however faint, whispering from afar. He couldn't make out what they were saying, but he did understand what they were trying to convey. And at some point, human voices began blending with them. Reciting the same mantras, like broken records—the phrasing may have differed, but they all wept in search of the same thing.

He naturally understood those whispers that no one but he—not even the priest—could hear. He'd probably been killed by his brother then... He'd probably been dead ever since. And since he'd died but remained in this world, he could hear the wails of other ghosts like him. And one day, his brother joined the chorus of lamentation. He realized his brother had died and was calling for him.

On that day, Shin enlisted in the military.

CHAPTER 6

FIAT JUSTITIA RUAT CAELUM

“What...?”

At first, she couldn't understand what Shin had just said. Everyone, killed? Their execution ground?

“What are you...?”

But it suddenly dawned on her. Six years ago, she'd met Rei, who was a Processor. The Eighty-Six marched onto this harrowing battlefield in exchange for having their families' civil rights restored. But in that case, why was Rei's younger brother, Shin—who should have had his rights as a citizen restored via Rei's conscription—standing on a battlefield right now as a Processor? As an Eighty-Six? The same held true for the other Processors. Every year, tens of thousands of recruits were sent to the front lines. But if they were still being sent, what had their parents and elder siblings been doing all this time?

“Impossible—!”

“It's possible, all right. The damn white pigs never intended to restore the Eighty-Six's rights to begin with.”

“They lure us to enlist with that promise and then use us up until they've squeezed the life out of us. They're goddamn pigs. Doesn't get any lower than that.”

Lena shook her head in the heat of the moment. Perhaps it was impossible for her to accept, with her sense of morality. The Republic. The motherland that had given her birth and raised her. No matter what, it couldn't go that far.

“This can't, it can't, it can't be—!”

Theo sighed. Not as an accusation, but out of bitter sympathy.

“We're not blaming you here, but... You've been in the eighty-five Sectors ever since the war started. Have you ever seen an Eighty-Six there?”

“...Ah—!”

The amount of time an Eighty-Six had to serve in exchange for the restoration of their rights was five years. Even if the Processors died during the war, their families' conferment should have been guaranteed. After nine years of war, the families of the dead Processors should have been allowed to return home, but she had never seen any of them. Not a single one. Lena might have spent her whole life in the First Sector, where Colorata rarely lived to begin with, but even so—none at all? That couldn't be.

How could she be so oblivious? She felt sick her to stomach.

There were so many clues. Rei and Shin being siblings. Processors who were only children when their parents or siblings enlisted. The First Sector being populated only by Alba. And she overlooked every single one. After everything she'd seen, she still believed in the Republic's infallibility, like a damn fool.

"Most Processors don't live to see the end of their service, so the Republic can weasel out of the deal, no problem. The problem is us Name Bearers, freaks who won't die and survive for years on the battlefield. If we lived, it means we were smart enough to avoid getting killed, and from the perspective of other Eighty-Six, we're heroes. They probably don't want us sparking a rebellion."

Raiden's voice was calm. It did carry indignation toward the Republic, but it was as if he'd grown tired of being angry by now.

"And that's why they transfer Name Bearers to the contested zones of their fronts. They expect us to die there. And most of the time, even skilled Name Bearers don't survive. But then there's Processors like us, the ones with the luck and the guts to survive in spite of it all. This is where it all ends. Each front's first ward's defensive unit. *This is the final disposal site.* This squadron is for Name Bearers marked for disposal. They get dumped out here and forced to fight until they die. Reinforcements will never come. They'll only send in the next group to be eliminated once we're completely wiped out... It's the end of the line for us. We're all going to die here."

The perversion of it all made her head spin. They weren't fighting to defend anything. They were just fighting with the knowledge that they would eventually be killed. This wasn't even forced conscription anymore. It was genocide carried out by a foreign enemy.

"B-but..."

Lena stuttered, grasping onto that last strand of hope.

"What if you still survive...?"

"Ah. Yeah, there's plenty of folks who don't know when to give up... And to dispose of them, the final mission of their term is a special recon operation with a zero percent rate of success or survival. No one ever came back from that. For all the white pigs cared, it was just getting rid of trash they'd had trouble binning. Cause for celebration, y'know?"

"..."

They were forced onto a battlefield of near-certain death to defend others without any compensation. If they lived too long, they got worked to death or sent to a squadron designed to be killed—and if they survived even that, they were practically ordered to die.

Tears of anger clouded her vision. Anger at her country. Just how deeply, how completely, utterly corrupt could this country be? She remembered Theo and Raiden complaining time after time about how bored they were. She remembered asking Shin about what he'd do once he was discharged and how he'd said he never thought about it. They never had a future to begin with. Never had a future to look forward to. All they had was an execution order signed in advance, with no way of knowing when that date would finally arrive.

"You all knew...?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry... Shin and Raiden, all of us... We didn't know how to tell you."

"Since...when...?"

Her own voice sounded like it was cracking. In contrast, Kurena replied with unnatural curtness.

"We knew from the beginning. I mean, my big sister, Theo's mom and dad, Shin's family... They all went to the battlefield, but the white pigs never kept their promises... So we all knew."

"But if you knew—! Why did you keep fighting?! Why didn't you run...?! Why didn't you try to take revenge on the Republic?!"

Hearing Lena's shriek, Raiden closed his eyes and smirked wryly.

"We got nowhere to run, princess. There's an army of Legion ahead of us and a minefield and an artillery cannon at our backs. Sure, a rebellion sounds like a sweet idea, but...the Eighty-Six have been run too ragged for that anymore."

If it was their parents' generation, it might have still been possible. But they'd prioritized guaranteeing their families' safety and freedom to live decently over toppling the Republic, going to the battlefield to ensure that. If they hadn't, their families in the internment camps outside the Gran Mule would have been the first annihilated by the Legion. They had no choice but to cling to the Republic's honeyed words.

And when their parents died, their elder siblings took to the battlefield to prove their loyalty and worth as citizens to the Republic. They wanted to prove, both to themselves and to the Republic that treated them like garbage, that they were proud citizens who could take back their honor. It was them, and not the white pigs who neglected to defend themselves, who were true citizens of the Republic. But Raiden and the others didn't even have that.

They had long since lost their families and were too young to remember being transported to the internment camps or days spent safe in that nurtured haven called the Republic. Any memories of living in the cities or being treated like humans were far away and out of reach.

The only life they knew was that of livestock surrounded by barbed wire and minefields, and the only Republic they knew was the persecutor that herded them into this situation. They never knew the Republic that claimed to stand for freedom and equality, brotherhood and justice and nobility. They'd been reduced to pigs before they could develop any kind of awareness or pride as its civilians. Raiden and the others didn't see themselves as Republic citizens.

They were the Eighty-Six—natives of this battlefield where they lived and died, surrounded by enemies until they breathed their last. This was the only honor they had to prove. They didn't give a damn for the Republic of San Magnolia. That foreign country populated by pigs could burn for all they cared.

"Then...why...?"

They weren't obligated to answer that question, either. But they answered regardless, because of this girl. This foolish girl who clung to them no matter how much she was shouted at, how much she was kicked down, how many times she was exposed to the wails of the lingering dead. Maybe after all this time, she'd finally exhausted them to the point of resignation.

Raiden opened his mouth to speak after confirming there was no objection in his comrades' silence.

"Until I was twelve years old, this old Alba hag sheltered me in the Ninth Sector."

"...? What...?"

"Shin was raised by a priest who stayed behind in the internment camp after refusing to evacuate, and you heard Theo's story about his captain before. We all know how terrible the Alba can be. Kurena had to deal with some of the most horrible Alba you could imagine. But Anju and Shin also knew Eighty-Six who were just as terrible."

They had known both humanity's despicable vulgarity and its most radiant nobility.

"And that's how we decided. It was simple, really. We decided we wanted to be both those things."

They would stretch out of that cramped cockpit and reach for the heavens. He may have forgotten the prayers that hag had taught him or the god she believed in, but he could still clearly remember the heartrending image of her crouching on the ground and weeping bitterly for them.

"If revenge was what we were after, then that really isn't all that hard to pull off. All we'd have to do is let the Legion pass through us... Sure, we'd die, but the Republic would be doomed, too. Imagining the white pigs finally getting what's coming to them... Well, it's got appeal, I'll give you that."

Their comrades in the internment camps would also be lost, but they would die in a few years, one way or another. Turning their backs on them because it was all hopeless anyway was...something the Processors probably could do.

"But still, there are Alba who don't deserve to die for no reason, and besides, going to the trouble of dying for that wouldn't really achieve anything."

"..."

Lena apparently couldn't understand. Her silence seemed to say that if they were pleased with that, so be it. He couldn't help but snicker. This little princess really was too well raised and an idiot. She probably never even thought of or wanted to take revenge on anyone. Revenge and hatred weren't simple enough to be resolved by just killing whomever you hated.

"It's not revenge until the other side regrets all the shit they've done with every fiber of their being, till they drop to their knees and beg you for forgiveness. That's when you kill 'em. Otherwise, it isn't revenge... But after all the shameless things they did, a rebellion or a massacre wouldn't make

the white pigs regret anything. You'd turn your eyes away from your own flaws and stupidity, pin them on someone else, act like some tragic victim, and then die pleading innocent... Like hell we'd ever stoop to the Republic's level. All it'd do is feed their narcissistic ego."

His tone had gotten harsher without him noticing. If there was one thing they couldn't forgive, it was that. The fact that the Republic truly believed it could do no wrong. Like those soldiers who mocked the old hag who'd followed her conscience and fought against oppression. Or the citizens who closed their eyes and plugged their ears from the reality of war, shutting themselves in a brittle reality within their fortified walls. The white pigs that deprived others of their rights despite refusing to fulfill their own duties and had the audacity to claim they were right and noble without an ounce of shame for their actions. They were hopelessly oblivious, so completely and utterly blind to the terrible contradiction between their actions and their words.

They would never, ever act anything like them.

"If we treated those bastards the way they treated us, we'd just become the same kind of scum. If we have to pick between fighting the Legion and dying or giving up and dying, we may as well fight and survive for as long as we can. We'll never give up or lose our way. That's why we fight—that's all the proof we need to know we existed... And if we end up protecting the white pigs in the process, well, can't say I like it, but so be it."

They were the Eighty-Six. A people of war, cast out onto the battlefield. Fighting until the moment all strength failed them and living their lives to the fullest until then was their pride. The Handler girl bit her lip in frustration. The taste of blood, of another's blood, spread in Raiden's mouth.

"Even if in the end...the only thing you have to look forward to is death...?"

Her voice sounded as if she wanted them to demand revenge. Raiden smiled sadly at her tone.

"What kinda dumb ass hangs himself just because he knows he's gonna die tomorrow? Even if you have no choice but to walk to the gallows, you can still choose how you're gonna climb the steps. We've made our choice. All that's left is to live by that."

And it was precisely because of this that they had been able to stare, defiantly, at the inevitable death that awaited them.

Raiden stopped before the hangar's open shutter, fixing his gaze on the silhouette of a man and the large frame of a Scavenger. Blue moonlight pierced the night air as the stars illuminated the dark sky with their keen glow. The stars and moon were relentless; even on nights when someone died, they glittered majestically. The world wasn't beautiful for anyone's sake. This world was always apathetic toward the concerns of individual humans.

"It's okay. Not much we can do about it, really. Thanks for today."

"...Pi."

Raiden observed Fido drop its shoulders dejectedly (quite literally lowering its front legs) as it left, and then he called out to Shin.

"Was that about Kino and the rest?"

"Yeah... We couldn't find any parts from Chise's rig. It's been a while since I had to look for a replacement."

"Just pick apart that model plane he worked on. The wings look just about perfect... But damn, not even a piece, huh? Figures, since he took a shell head-on..."

Fido spent a long while scouring that day's battlefield in search of aluminum grave markers for the deceased. Marking these fragments as prime search targets despite this task being unrelated to its original purpose was a habit Fido had picked up in its years of service to the Reaper.

Raiden had heard the story of when it happened from Shin. The first Personal Mark fragment Fido had returned to the memento-filled cockpit of Undertaker's nameless Juggernaut was that of a longsword-wielding, headless skeletal knight. They'd found the wreckage of that unit in some ruins, and Shin adopted it, exchanging the sword for a shovel. It was his brother's unit and his brother's Personal Mark.

"It might not be bothering you, but I'll say it anyway. It wasn't your fault."

Shin's ability could tell him where the Legion were, but it didn't tell him what type. He could deduce that to some extent based on their numbers and formation, but not when they were hidden in the distance between many other units, and even less so when it was an entirely new, unknown type he had no way of knowing existed.

Shin gave Raiden a fleeting glance and shrugged wordlessly. Raiden assumed it probably didn't really bother him, but that was okay. Steeling one's resolve and dying at the end of one's road was, after all was said and done, the responsibility of those who died.

Shin's clear red eyes turned to look in the direction of that day's battlefield, and Raiden fixed his gaze there as well. Their minds were still focused on the events of that day and the Long-Range Artillery-type Legion that had fired on them.

"...I figured it'd fire at the base next, but for some reason, it hasn't."

"Heavy artillery is designed for suppressing fire or destroying fixed targets. It's not made for firing at armored weapons and isn't something you'd use to shoot down a single squadron. They probably made it for bombarding towns and fortifications. I'm guessing that was a test firing, and they figured they may as well aim at us while they were at it."

Raiden chuckled grimly.

"They took down four of our guys while they were at it. We'd have been toast if they'd kept firing."

"If they complete it, they'll be taking down more than four rigs. They'll leave the Republic in ruins. Not that it matters much to us... But the major can't let that happen. She's the one who'll have to think of a plan, though."

Shin had spoken indifferently, but Raiden was a bit surprised. Shin probably hadn't noticed it yet himself.

"...What?"

"Nothin'."

He'd never heard Shin express concern for the Handler before.

"...Whatever the case, this long-distance cannon is the same as the Skorpion in the sense that it needs Long-Range Observer Units. The cannon itself seems to be silent right now."

"You can tell?"

"From its voice. I'll be able to tell next time it moves to strike at us... Though it probably won't fire that cannon again."

"...?"

Shin looked back at Raiden, who stared at him, confused. Turning his gaze back to the sky of that distant battlefield, Shin narrowed his eyes.

"*He found me.* He was probably looking through the optical sensors of the Ameise that served as Observer Units."

"...! Your brother...?!"

Raiden froze in place. He'd never seen it personally, but they'd run into the forces led by that Legion several times. It was a Shepherd that employed frighteningly subtle, coldhearted, and cunning strategies. Shin smiled thinly, gazing in the direction where the Shepherd probably was. It was a smile mixed with fear and recklessness, the smile of a war demon who danced upon death's maw. His thin body trembled with excitement, and without even noticing, he wrapped his hands around himself, as if trying to stop it.

"I can feel that he's at the edge of this ward, and it looks like he noticed me, too. He'll come for me next time. There's no way he'd just blast me from a distance. That's way too lukewarm a way to end this."

Raiden grimaced, gripped by cold, penetrating fear. Not a shadow remained of his trusted comrade who had always been so composed. A deep, seething madness had overtaken Shin's features. He was after his brother's head. The head of the same brother who'd killed him once before. Looking for the Legion that stole his brother's voice when he died in those ruins on the eastern front.

The Reaper laughed. Like a blade. Like madness. Like the lurid, glistening edge of an old sword, chipped and honed by countless battles, as it swung down to claim the life of its prey.

"This is the best outcome I could have hoped for, but you guys got the short end of the stick... What will you do? Knowing that you'll die tomorrow, will you hang yourself today?"

Raiden, too, was smiling fearlessly. The werewolf matched the Reaper in ferocity. He was a wild beast who'd bite to death anything that threatened him, his fixation on life savage and fierce. He could see, from the corner of his eye, that countdown message on the other side of the hangar.

ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY-NINE DAYS TILL I END MY SERVICE! FUCKIN' GLORY TO THE SPEARHEAD SQUADRON!

And the end of their service meant their deaths. This ridiculously jovial countdown ticked down the moments until their execution. The time remaining on this halted countdown was actually thirty-two days. Even if that countdown fell to zero, they'd keep fighting and live through that day.

"You think this is a joke...? We'll be sticking with our Reaper to the very end."



"Wow... Oh my God... That is so like the Republic..."

Annette's expression turned dumbfounded when she heard Lena's story. Lena had said it would be bad to talk where others might overhear, so they'd taken the conversation to her lab. She'd served coffee in their matching mugs decorated with black-and-white rabbits, along with odd half-pink, half-purple cookies.

"Annette, please, you have to help me. We can't let this... We have to stop this."

Annette continued nibbling her cookies apathetically, her silvery eyes glaring at Lena.

"What exactly do you want me to do?"

It was a cold, dry gaze, like that of a witch who'd lived for a thousand years and grown tired of the world.

"Go make speeches on TV? Have talks with the higher-ups? You know that won't change anything. You can be as passionate and idealistic as you want, but if pretty words could make everyone change their ways, things wouldn't have gone this far in the first place. You know that much."

"That's—"

"Just stop it already. There's nothing you can do. No matter what you try, it won't amount to anything, so just—"

"Stop it, Annette!"

Lena cut her off, unable to take any more. She was her precious friend, but Lena couldn't allow even her to say those words.

"People's lives are at stake. You know that... Stop trying to make yourself out to be a villain just so you can have an excuse to do nothing. Cut the crap."

"You're the one who needs to cut the crap!"

Annette rose to her feet suddenly. Lena gulped in surprise. That was how menacing Annette's glare was.

"Stop it already. Seriously, just—just stop. There's nothing we can do. There's nothing in our power that can save those people!"

"Annette...?"

"...I had a friend once."

Annette's bellow instantly fell to a soft murmur. It was the weak, powerless voice of a girl who'd been driven completely and utterly to her wit's end.

"He lived in the house next door. Our dads worked at the same university. They were friends, and I would play with that boy often. The boy's mom's family had this mysterious power, and the mom, the boy, and his older brother could feel one another's feelings, even from a distance."

The boy's father was a neurologist and researched the way the brain operated when sympathizing with others, in order to create an AI that could effectively befriend people. So even though it was research, no one did anything particularly dangerous. They used sensors shaped like toys to have them try to communicate from different rooms, and since the experiments were all gamelike, Annette butted in and demanded they let her play, too. Annette's father would gather volunteers from the university to re-create these experiments, and they all participated in exchange for extra credits and her mother's snacks. There were hardly any results to speak of, but it was fun.

"But all that ended when the war began."

Even though they had just started primary school, the boy stopped coming to class. That's how bad the discrimination against the Colorata had become. Annette was bullied at school for being friends with a "stain." One day, she came home from school, and the boy asked her to come play, and she lashed out at him in anger. They started arguing, and unable to hold back her irritation, she called him a stain.

The boy didn't seem offended; he just looked at Annette with the confused expression of a child who didn't understand what he'd just been called. But even so, Annette shivered, realizing that an irreparable fissure had formed between them, and she was the one who'd delivered the blow that had caused it. She was terrified.

And that's why she did it. Her parents suggested they let their friends' family take shelter in their house. Her father was tormented by the fear of the danger his family might face if their act of mercy was exposed, so he asked Annette what they should do. And she told him. She nudged her father, who'd probably just been looking for that final push of affirmation, that final approval...in the opposite direction.

I don't care about him. I don't want to be in danger because of him.

The boy and his family were taken to the internment camp the next day.

She had to believe there was nothing she could do, that nothing could have been done in the first place. But still, Annette trembled as she laughed.

That's how things are, how they should be. But this friend of mine...why does she always cast that idealistic gaze of hers in my direction...?

"You know, Lena, you can act like a saint all you want, but you're just as guilty as the rest of us... Do you have any idea how many Eighty-Six we had to kill to develop that RAID Device you're wearing?"

“...It can’t be.”

Human experimentation—

“It broadcasts words, after all, so it didn’t make sense to use animals. The fact that the Eighty-Six weren’t considered human was very convenient... They had to produce results as quickly as possible, so they conducted research without any regard for the test subjects’ safety. Dad was in charge of it.”

Her father hadn’t told Annette anything at the time, but she knew everything from the research records he’d left behind. Countless test subjects died when their brains burned out, unable to handle the strain of the experiments. And since all the adults were sent to the battlefield, they’d had to use children. Eighty-Six were allotted numbers, which meant their names were never recorded. So no one—not even her father—could know whether any of the children who died the most horrific deaths imaginable in the laboratories of the internment camps had been *that boy*.

“My dad’s death wasn’t an accident. He committed suicide.”

Her father had said time and time again, *I abandoned my friend and caused the suffering of countless others. More than anyone else, I deserve to die suffering*. The synchronization rate hadn’t been set to maximum by mistake. And Annette considered herself just as guilty for abandoning that boy, which was why she continued her father’s research. When she received the request to check the RAID Device’s relation to the Handlers who’d committed suicide, she’d wondered, *What would happen if I told them they had to bring the Processor who was said to be the cause of these suicides?* She would have him brought over, claiming he was a precious sample, and keep him detained until the war ended. True, it would be confinement, but at the very least, one would survive.

The fact that she had even considered that terrified her, because she couldn’t even save her friend back then. So when she’d heard the scumbags in Transport had refused, saying it wasn’t their job, she had actually been relieved. *There, see? I can’t save anyone after all.*

“But that’s as true for me as it is for you, Lena.”

She laughed. She mocked her foolish, kindhearted friend who still couldn’t fathom the depths of human malice.

“What you did was worse than doing nothing at all. Your interference made them live longer, and that’s why they’ve been ordered to die now. If they’d died on their own, they would’ve at least gotten killed without having to be told to, but because of you, Command had to go ahead and give the order!”

Lena’s breath stuck in her throat. Seeing that beautiful face contort in agony filled Annette with ecstatic joy, but at the same time, she was consumed by bitter sorrow.

Ah, there, I did it.

I did it again.

Annette picked up her mug and dumped it into the trash bin. When had they bought these mugs together, again? They'd decided they had to match and had picked them out together and had them wrapped. They'd drunk coffee out of them for the first time in this very room.

The sound of the brittle porcelain shattering echoed throughout the room like a scream.

"I hate you, Lena... I never want to see your face again."

†

After that, the Spearhead squadron was sent on two more sorties. During the course of those operations, three more Processors died.

Both times, it was because the Legion employed strategies clearly unlike anything they'd used before. The same kind of precise, levelheaded, cunning, and complicated strategies as when that Long-Range Artillery type was first deployed. Shin said the Shepherd was there. It hadn't come out since the first battle with the Long-Range Artillery type and was commanding them from the rear.

And as all that unfolded, Lena was unable to do anything. She couldn't fire a single shell to support them or annul their execution. And in the end, they got the order.

"A long-term reconnaissance mission into Legion territory—?!"

Lena cried out, unable to believe the contents of the notification on her information terminal. The participants were all active Juggernauts in the first ward's first defensive unit. The target for reconnaissance was a coordinate at the edge of the area to which they would advance. The mission had no time limit. Any attempt to retreat during this mission would be perceived as desertion, and any who attempted it would be promptly executed. In accordance with this, all Sensory Resonance target records, machine data records, and Republic military register records would be deleted. Each unit would be provided a month's supplies and ammunition.

...It was absurd. This wasn't reconnaissance. This didn't even constitute a mission. They were being ordered to advance into enemy territory and die. The only thing they weren't explicitly ordered to do was die in vain. Command wasn't even trying to make it seem like a mission. They wouldn't last a few days, much less a month. The scouting party's numbers would gradually be diminished as they sustained attack after attack by the Legion until they were wiped out completely.

After their many long, meaningless battles, their final fate was to be abandoned at the heart of the battlefield and die. And it was allowed. The Republic ordered this to happen; this was its true form. Clenching her teeth to the point of pain, Lena kicked a chair as she rose to her feet.

"You're asking me to retract the reconnaissance mission, Lena?"

"Please, Uncle Jérôme. Letting this go on any longer is unforgivable."

Lena bowed her head deeply before Karlstahl, who was her last hope. She had done some investigating while trying to find a way to have the mission canceled, but apparently, these outrageous operations were a “tradition” of sorts that had been upheld, uninterrupted, for years.

It wasn’t just the Spearhead squadron. The southern front’s first ward’s first defensive unit, the Laser Edge squadron. The western front’s first ward’s first defensive unit, the Longbow squadron. The northern front’s first ward’s first defensive unit, the Sledgehammer squadron. Each and every one of these units had all its members virtually annihilated over the course of five months, and in the rare instance of survivors, the Republic had prepared Special Reconnaissance missions. The survival rate, no matter the scenario, was always zero. The Eighty-Six who held out until the end were sent to these final disposal sites to be culled—

Karlstahl’s gaze fell to the documents on his desk.

“...This is impressive. Usually, only one but at most two Juggernauts are dispatched on Special Reconnaissance missions. You’re the first case where we’ve had enough Processors to send out a platoon-size force, Lena. That’s why I told you, didn’t I? ‘Do the bare minimum.’”

“...”

Your interference made them live longer.

Lena flinched, Annette’s last remark surfacing in her memory. Gritting her teeth, she went on the offensive.

“Please. The Republic... We can’t afford to sin any further.”

“...”

“And if human decency and justice aren’t cause enough to stir anyone’s heart...then maybe the country’s national interest is? Eliminating skilled, experienced Processors severely damages the country’s war potential and the safety of its citizens. Uncle Jérôme, if you present it like this to the National Defense Council and public relations, you might be able to—”

Karlstahl listened to Lena’s words with a grim expression and opened his mouth to answer just as grimly.

“Can you not see this as the Republic government and its citizens tacitly agreeing that the annihilation of the Eighty-Six is beneficial to the Republic’s national interest, and the Republic military as simply acting upon this policy?”

“Wha—?!”

Lena was aghast. Throwing all notions of politeness to the wind, she leaned over the antique desk.

“What are you saying?! Like I’ve just said, this is harming both the Republic itself and its conscience—”

“If the war ends and the Eighty-Six survive, the Republic will be subject to censure and held responsible for their compensation. We’d be held accountable for their internment, the requisition of their properties, their forced conscription. For everything. Just the compensation for their seized properties and the reparations would cost the Republic an astronomical

amount. Do you honestly think the civilians would be able to accept the tax increases that would involve?"

"...But that's..."

"And if any of the neighboring countries are still out there, they would learn what we did to their fellow Colorata. We would lose both face and dignity, and the Republic would be branded as a country of oppressors... All these issues would be avoided if we exterminated the Eighty-Six."

Her breathing was shallow, and she couldn't stop gritting her teeth. Shin had said the same thing.

"So that's why you're not letting them collect or bury their dead...!"

"That's right. I'll add that there are no records or graves for those who died in the Gran Mule or the internment camps, and the personnel files of all deceased Processors are disposed of. As soon as they're exterminated, we make it as though they never existed. You can't oppress someone who doesn't exist. Any fact that threatens the Republic's infallibility gets treated as if it doesn't exist."

"...I can't believe the civilians could be so foul..."

Karlstahl seemed slightly sad for some reason.

"They're tacitly agreeing to this, Lena. Very few people intended for this to happen, but nearly everyone willingly turns a blind eye to the reality that it could be happening. Or perhaps you could see the majority of people who were obediently indifferent as advocates of what happened... This is all a result of the democracy we take so much pride in, Lena. The majority of civilians have agreed they don't care what happens to the Eighty-Six so long as they can benefit from it. And it's our military's job to abide by that decision."

Lena slammed on the desk with her palm. A dull, empty sound resonated through the office.

"Democracy does not enable the majority to treat the minority however it wishes! Our national policy, the values of the five-hued flag, apply to everyone equally, and that was the basis for our constitution! How can we even pretend to be a Republic if we can't even follow that?!"

For a moment, a dull light flared up in Karlstahl's eyes. It was out of both irritation toward Lena and a deep, bottomless anger toward something far more distant, far vaguer and more shapeless.

"The constitution? A constitution is nothing more than a piece of paper if no one acknowledges its value! The same way the revolutionary government sentenced Saint Magnolia, whom they saw as nothing more than a symbol, to death in prison after they overthrew the monarchy!"

His shout made Lena's breath catch in her throat. It was the first time she'd heard him speak with such anger.

"You would call this barbarism?! Oh yes, it most certainly is! And that's what we get for giving the foolish masses everything they wanted! They exploit every right they have but shrink from the duties that come with them; they violate others' rights freely; they're beasts who care for nothing

but their own benefit and well-being, and this is what we get for letting them call the shots! These lazy, despicable fools who assume the Saint's name and besmirch everything she stood for with their every action could never achieve anything but evil!"

His anger suddenly inverted into weariness, and he sank into his armchair, sighing despondently.

"Freedom and equality are ideals far too premature for us, Lena. For us, for all of humankind... And perhaps they always will be."

With eyes drained of emotion, Lena looked down on the man she once admired as a second father. She had no other way to stifle the scorn and disdain bubbling up from the depths of her heart.

"That's just your despair and your excuses to justify it... Sitting idly by and allowing countless people to die for that can't be anything but a mistake."

Karlstahl's gaze rose to meet Lena's. That old, silver, resigned gaze.

"And all you say is to *hope*, but hope can't save anything. And neither can ideals. Ideals are precious exactly because they are unreachable, and since they cannot be reached, they can never influence us. Hope and ideals cannot spur anyone to action... Isn't that why you came to me?"

Lena clenched her teeth bitterly. He was right, and she hated it.

"Despair and hope are one and the same. They're two sides of the same wish that will never come true. The only difference is what you call them."

"..."

Even so. Giving up because you know a dream can never come true and simply sitting and waiting for fate to claim you... Or fighting against fate and crying out against the dying light, even though you know that dream will never be realized. Those are decidedly different things. But this man couldn't see that difference.

Ah, so that's it. This...this is despair.

"...I'll be taking my leave, Commodore Karlstahl."

†

The Spearhead squadron received the notice about the Special Reconnaissance mission the same time Lena did, and they set about their preparations solemnly. Receiving and organizing the gear the Republic had flown in for the operation. Securing what supplies they would need from the base itself. Selecting the Scavengers that would handle those supplies. Elaborate inspections of the Juggernauts that couldn't expect any more special maintenance once the mission began. Settling any final affairs the Processors who would never return still had to take care of.

All these duties were summarized in paperwork that the squad captain—Shin—would have to fill in, and confirming they'd been addressed fell to him as a result. Aldrecht took over the preparation and loading of supplies, as

per usual, and he was standing in the corner of the now significantly emptier hangar, making sure the containers were properly filled.

"Provisions, energy packs, ammo, and spare parts are all in the requested amounts. Oh, and since a certain captain's got this habit of pilotin' like a lunatic, we also made sure to put extra leg components in yer rig. You can handle simple repairs, right?"

"Yeah. I break it often, after all."

"Don't mouth off to me like that, ya snot-nosed brat...! There's only one rig left fer ya to take. Don't go crazy, ya got that?"

The crewman's thick voice lowered earnestly, but Shin simply shrugged. Even in the face of those sincere words, Shin couldn't make any promises. Fighting with all you had when faced with the Legion was key when it came to piloting a Juggernaut.

Aldrecht smiled sadly.

"This is the last time. Lyin' wouldn't kill ya, would it? Or if nothin' else, listen to me fer once in yer damn life."

"I'm sorry."

"Tch, I swear to God, kid, yer a real piece o' work..."

Aldrecht sighed sadly, and silence fell over them. Shin probably didn't feel it was particularly uncomfortable, but it took Aldrecht a few moments of scratching his graying hair to continue.

"...Shin. Once I'm done loadin' these, there's somethin' I wanna tell ya. Could ya call the other kids over here when I'm done?"

Shin blinked in surprise and glanced up at Aldrecht's sunglasses. He looked as if he wanted to ask why, but apparently, his Para-RAID activated, and he fell silent.

"Captain Nouzen..."

"Major."

He signaled with his hand that they'd continue this talk later, and Aldrecht nodded and turned to leave.

"I received the notification about the Special Reconnaissance mission."

"We got it as well. Preparations are going according to schedule. Did something happen?"

In contrast to Lena's grave tone, Shin spoke as if he'd been notified that he was going to some standard battlefield. Hearing the calmness in his voice, Lena bit her lip.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't able to convince them to rescind the order..."

A moment later, Lena pursed her lips and fell silent. Unable to hold herself back anymore, she opened her mouth to speak.

"Please run away. You shouldn't have to follow these absurd orders."

She felt completely and utterly pathetic. She couldn't have this outrageous operation canceled, and the only thing she had left was this irresponsible suggestion. But the response he offered was calm and collected. Though phrased as a question, it was a flat refusal.

"Run away to where?"

“...”

Lena knew this. There was nowhere to run. And even if they did run away, they wouldn't survive. A lone group of people wouldn't be able to produce enough food to live on. It was exactly because man could not live on his own that people came together and formed villages, cities, and countries. And the very same system that was created to establish and promote life was now trying to kill them. A deep anger toward something she didn't know how to properly define rose from the pit of her stomach, and Lena lashed out at him, spurred by that emotion.

“Why?! Why are you always so...?!”

That composure of his that so calmly accepted unreasonable death angered her. He was like a sinner who'd accepted his death sentence, but he hadn't done anything to deserve this!

“Because it's not something worth resenting. Everyone dies someday. The fact that it comes a bit sooner for us isn't something we should condemn others for.”

“But that's not true! They're killing you, and you know it! They took away your future and your hope, and now they're coming to ruthlessly take your life, and you tell me those aren't things worth condemning them for?!”

She was mostly ranting and shouting tearfully, so Shin held his tongue for a moment. When he did respond, she could feel a faint, wry smile in his voice.

“Major. We're not going there to die.”

It was a resolve free of regrets and attachments, one that felt somehow relieved.

“We've always been trapped and subjugated here, and that's finally coming to an end. We can finally go to the place we're meant to reach, walking along the road we chose to follow. We're finally going to be free. So please, don't speak ill of this.”

Lena hung her head sadly. *But that's not freedom...* Freedom meant being unfettered to go wherever you wanted and become whatever you wanted, so long as you didn't infringe on others' rights or the law. Or if nothing else, it was being allowed to wish for those things—things to which any person should be entitled. If all they could wish for was their death tomorrow and the path it took them to get to this day, then they weren't free. That could never be called freedom. Never.

“Then...then if nothing else, don't fight. You can tell where the Legion are, right? So advancing while avoiding battle should be—”

“That won't work. Even if I can tell where they are, we wouldn't be able to slip by their patrols unnoticed. Our only way to move forward is by fighting them... And we knew this from the beginning.”

Shin was definitely, however faintly, smiling when he said this. As if he intended to convey he wanted—not knew, but wanted—this from the beginning. Unable to control her emotions, Lena closed her eyes.

“You want to kill your brother who's been taken over by the Legion... don't you?”

A momentary silence. And then, Shin sighed with annoyance.

“...Why do you always keep noticing things you’re better off not knowing...?”

“I can tell. After all...”

It happened when he said he was looking for Rei despite already knowing he was dead. And he did it whenever he talked about the first ward’s Shepherd. Every time, Shin had had the same cold, ruthless smile. Shin himself might not have even noticed, similar to how Lena herself wasn’t always conscious of her own expression. Perhaps the feelings in the depths of his heart betrayed him when he least expected it. That emotion like terror and hatred, obsession and compulsion, like a cruel, cold blade of madness he held poised to stab himself.

This emotion wasn’t a wish. If anything, it was the direct opposite.

“If that’s true, then it’s all the more reason not to fight. Even if it’s the Legion, killing your brother is just—”

“He’s the Shepherd. If I don’t take him out, we’ll never be able to advance.”

His tone was cold and severe. It was the first time she’d ever heard irritation in his voice.

“Captain...”

“If commanding us is too hard, you can stop Resonating with us... Raiden and Kaie have already told you that plenty of times.”

His sharpness made Lena’s breath catch. Realizing he’d let his emotions get to him, Shin took a deep breath and reassumed the indifferent, businesslike attitude he’d had when Lena had only just been appointed.

“...Major. We don’t need you to command us anymore.”

“That’s—”

“Let me say it another way. I don’t want you to hear my brother’s last words.”

That curse. That resentment. Shin didn’t want to paint those over Lena’s image of his brother’s smile and outstretched hand.

“...”

“And one more thing. I can’t hear the voices of the Legion that used to be beyond the eastern border.”

He made it sound like he’d forgotten to file a report. Maybe it was an attempt to cover up something he was trying to convey.

“Maybe that’s just the limit of what I can hear, but it’s possible someone is still alive out there. Maybe someone will come to help before the Republic falls... If I take down the Shepherd, the Legion will be thrown into chaos for a while. That’s all the time I can buy you, so until then...you have to stay alive, Major.”

His tone pushed her away, and his voice was indifferent, but those words that almost felt like a prayer for her well-being made Lena clench her fists.

†

Haruto died when they went to sortie that day. It was also the first operation where Lena didn’t command them from start to finish.

Then came the day of the Special Reconnaissance mission. They mounted their Juggernauts, the monitors switching on and filling up with their activation sequences and boot-check results. Raiden scoffed seeing the number of friendly units on his sub-monitor.

"Just five of us, huh? Sure starting to miss Haruto right about now..."

If he'd lived two days longer, he could've joined us on this fun little hike. Theo sighed heavily on the other side of the Resonance.

"So in the end, the major didn't check in one last time."

"Well, color me surprised. Didn't think you'd actually end up missing her, Theo."

"That's not it, you moron... But still."

Theo cocked his head slightly.

"I guess I do kind of regret not talking to her one last time."

"She's been with us through so much. We should at least get to say good-bye. It's only fair."

"Yep, you get it, Anju. Like, it's totally fine if she's not here, but if she were, it would've been nice to say good-bye."

"It doesn't matter either way. We kept telling her not to get involved with us, and it finally sank in."

Despite her words, Kurena sounded a bit sulky. Hearing Theo and Anju snicker over the line, she snapped at them.

Raiden sighed, looking up at the canopy. *Yep, that's about right...* He didn't think Lena would completely stop Resonating with them after everything that had happened. He didn't think she was the type to chicken out now, after all this time... Nah, she was probably brooding and unable to face them because of her stupid guilt. There were definitely a few things he wanted to tell her before they had to go... But if they didn't get the chance, so be it.

Final check sequence complete. Start-up acknowledged. The screens flickered to life, displaying the maintenance crew's retreating backs. Raiden lowered his head in gratitude to the battered barracks and maintenance crew who'd helped them for the past six months. They might not have seen, but he had to do it anyway.

Fido's legs were linked to containers loaded with a month's worth of ammunition, supplies, and living necessities for five, and the Scavenger stood behind the scout party like an overgrown centipede. That marked the last of their preparations. Once they left for the mission, their names would be wiped from the military register, and their machine data records would be disposed of. Their Sensory Resonance target records—their link to their Handler—would also be deleted that afternoon. If they tried to Resonate with the Republic, the interception cannon would fire on them. They were to advance as far as they could into enemy territory, even if it cost them their lives.

Even with this bleak future staring him in the face, Raiden's heart was surprisingly serene. He'd been prepared for this ever since being appointed

to this squadron. Daiya was there back then, and it was just six of them. The six boarded a transport that took them to their new posting, where they met Kaie, Haruto, and Kino.

They'd all had their pictures retaken for their personnel files. Every time a squad got reorganized, its members had to get updated photos, and they'd stood with their backs to a wall with lines on it to measure their heights, each holding a board with their personal number on it. It was like a mug shot. These were scrapped when a squadron got dissolved, so by tonight, they'd be done away with. Their portraits, which would never be used for the funerals they'd never have, would be burned tonight. And the other picture that timid, kindhearted soldier took of them...? Who knew how long that one would last.

They all renewed their oath that night, that no matter how much they might be treated like pigs, they'd never give their oppressors the satisfaction of acting like pigs. That they would fight to the bitter end, even if there was only one left standing.

This is the best. In the end, there were five left. Raiden smirked, thinking that this wasn't bad at all, and naturally found his attention drawn to Undertaker, who stood as the vanguard. That Personal Mark of a headless skeleton carrying a shovel. It represented their Reaper, the one who'd led them all this far—the one who'd now lead them to death's door and probably well beyond that, carrying the 576 aluminum grave markers of their fallen comrades with him.

He could feel Shin's red eyes flutter open as he said solemnly:

"...Let's go."

Stirred by that faint voice, he awoke from his standby phase.

He's coming. He's still far, but he's drawing closer.

He had sought him for so long and had now finally found him again. The one he'd been waiting to meet for so long... His impatience burned like hunger, like lust.

I can't wait any longer. I have to welcome him. And this time, for sure...

The sound of the ghosts he could always hear grew louder as they began advancing in their direction. The Legion moved in a single lump, like a tidal wave of tyranny washing over the land, gradually surging toward them. The Eintagsfliege deployed first like a subtle silver swarm, spreading as a filament choking the heavens, blotting out the sun.

"...Shin."

"Yeah."

Shin replied curtly to Raiden's hoarse whisper. They were on a collision course. They tried changing directions, but the enemy unit's vanguard shifted in accordance with them. It only made sense... If Shin could hear the voices of the Legion, logically, the reverse should apply. Considering the topography, he changed course for what would be the best terrain for them to engage. If they had to clash with the Legion, they should at least pick a battlefield that gave them some kind of advantage.

Their radar screens filled with blips. It was a code that meant the presence of hostile units. The number of blips increased by the second, and the path to the point where they would intersect lit up in white. They swerved around the hems of the hills that blocked their fields of vision, finding themselves in front of a thicket of trees. This place bordered the forested woodlands, and a large force of Legion, stretching out as far as the eye could see, lay in wait for them.

Recon units of the Scout-type Ameise stood in the forefront. Two kilometers behind them were mixed armored units consisting of the Tank type, Löwe, and the Dragoon type, Grauwolf. Several kilometers behind them was yet a second wave of the same armored unit, and they could just barely make out a third behind that. Beyond probably lay an encampment of the Long-Range Gunner type, Skorpion. This army likely included every single Legion in the first ward.

And at the vanguard, advancing toward them with an air of composure and a force of Ameise waiting on it, was a Heavy Tank type—a Dinosaurs. It stood at a height of four meters and was twice the weight of a Löwe, its massive frame covered in solid, bulky armor. It was as menacing as a gargantuan fortress, its massive size supported by eight legs, which granted it terrifying mobility. Its massive 155 mm turret and the secondary armament, a 75 mm coaxial cannon, both swerved in the Juggernauts' direction, making the extra two 57 mm heavy machine guns mounted to it seem like toys in comparison.

It was obvious even without hearing it that this was this army's Shepherd. It had deployed its forces here, not simply because this was the straight line they were moving in, but instead because it was deliberately lying in wait to challenge the Juggernauts. It had considered the situation and analyzed its opponents' movements, a feat of cognition impossible for any common Sheep. And this Shepherd, which had always lurked in the depths of the first ward, was also...

"...Shin..."

As if to wipe away any doubt, he could hear that low voice, one he remembered clearly. It was the same voice, speaking the same words he'd last heard back when *he* was still alive.

This voice incessantly calling out to him.

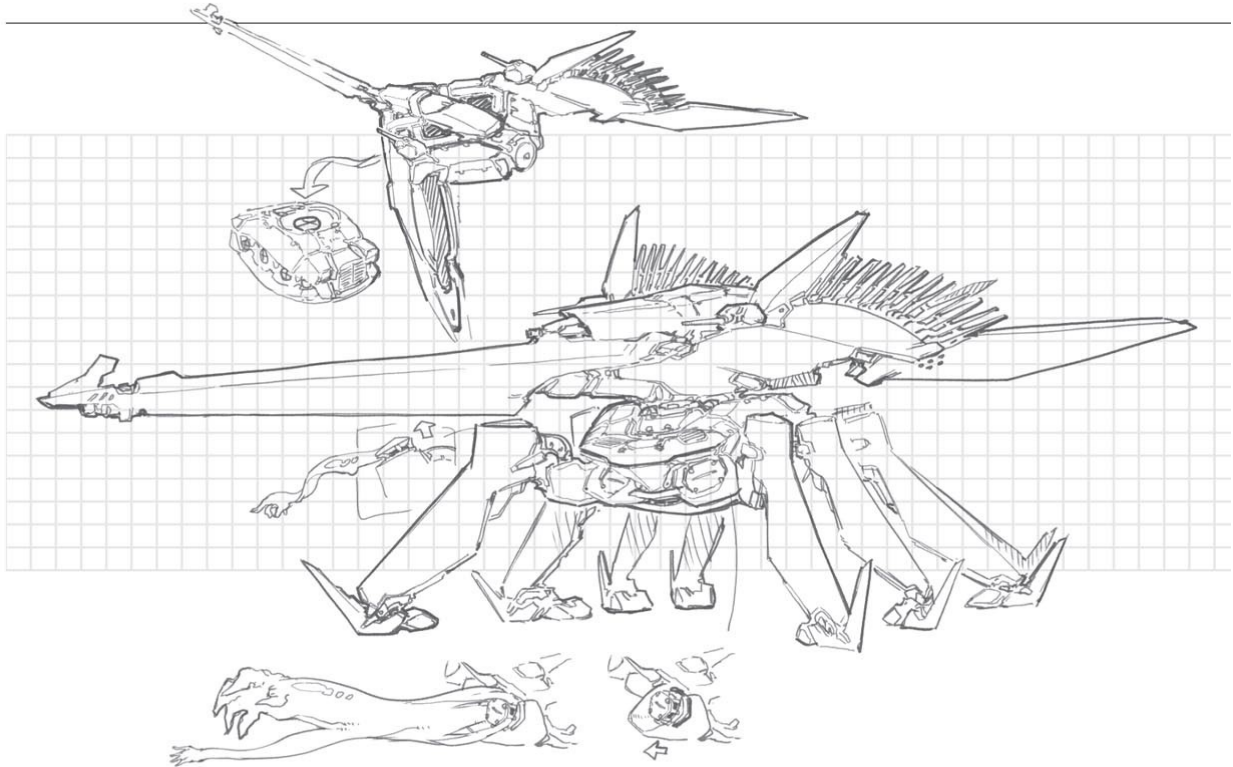
Shin smiled faintly. You finally came out... Finally, you show your face to me.

Shin's smirk was cold, sharp, and ferocious. Like a blade. Like madness.

"I've finally found you...Brother."

THE CAUTION DRONES

Highly Dangerous Unit



Heavy Tank class:

Dinosauria

[ARMAMENTS]

155 mm Mounted Cannon Turret ×1
Secondary 75 mm Coaxial Cannon ×1
12.7 mm Heavy Machine Gun ×2

Note: The unit encountered by the Spearhead squadron was also capable of employing Liquid Micromachine “arms.” The scope of their performance and capabilities is unknown.

Its name is derived from the word for *dinosaur*. Befitting its name, it is equipped with terrifyingly powerful firepower and a massive frame that puts even the Löwe—a lion—to shame. Almost nothing can withstand the force of its 155 mm artillery cannon. In addition, it is equipped with auxiliary equipment that allows it to overcome the Tank class’s weakness of struggling to make sharp turns. More than anything, its massive frame and weight of one hundred tons (roughly one hundred times the weight of an automobile) make it so that by only moving about, it can trample and crush the majority of its opponents.

INTERLUDE
THE HEADLESS KNIGHT IV

The snow fluttered down, soundlessly and endlessly. The white snow falling from the sky was as beautiful as despair that filled both heart and soul, as tyranny, as the world itself rejecting everything and anything.

Rei lay on his back in his Juggernaut's exposed cockpit. The canopy blowing off had, at least, given him a view of the sky, as he looked up at the snow oozing out of the darkness of the night.

"...Shin."

When his younger brother was born when he was ten, Rei saw him as a gift, a precious little brother he'd awaited for so long. He would pamper him more than their parents did, which was why his brother would grow up to become something of a spoiled crybaby. Rei, who could do anything and knew everything, always kept him safe and cherished him more than anything. He was his little brother's hero.

When Rei was seventeen, the war broke out, and Rei, his parents, and his brother weren't considered human anymore. Their motherland turned its guns against them, herded them onto trucks, and then loaded them onto a freight train. And through it all, Rei's arms were always wrapped around Shin, who cried and clung to him the whole way there. He swore he would protect his brother, no matter what came their way.

The internment camp consisted of a small barracks and a production plant, surrounded by thick barbed wire fences and land mines. When they received a notice telling them they could have their civil rights restored in exchange for military service, Rei's father was the first to enlist. He smiled, saying he had to at least send them back home, and he left, never to return.

No sooner had the message that their father had died been delivered than their mother received a directive requesting her enlistment. The rights they should have gotten back hadn't been restored to them. The government's derisive excuse was that one person's service could restore only one person's rights, and from their mother's perspective, she had two children to protect. That was how their mother went to her death, and just as they received the notification of her death, Rei's enlistment directive arrived.

Rei stood still in his assigned room, his eyes darkening with the violent anger that tormented him. An enlistment directive. That horrible piece of sophistry—that one person's service could restore only one person's rights

—had been proven false. Just how low would they sink? The government, the Alba... The very world.

Why didn't I—? I already had a vague idea this would happen, so why didn't I stop Mom back then...?!

"Brother..."

Shin.

Stay away. Just go somewhere; it doesn't matter where. I can't be bothered with you right now, not the way I am now.

"Brother... Where's Mommy? Isn't she coming back?"

I already told you. Don't make me say it again.

His brother's dim-wittedness irritated him to the core.

"Why...? Why did she...die?"

Rei felt as if something had snapped.

It was you.

It's because there were two of us.

Grabbing Shin by the neck and pushing him down on the floor, Rei wrapped his fingers around Shin's throat and squeezed with all his might, trying to strangle him.

Yes, break. Break, dammit! Let me rip his damn head off!

Spurred by wrath, he shouted, blaming Shin for everything.

That's right—Mom died because of Shin. If he wasn't here, if my stupid brother wasn't here, Mom wouldn't have died trying to make him a human again.

Battering him with condemnations one after another was pleasant. He hoped it was unbearable. How he wished the stupid boy wouldn't be able to take any more and would just die.

"What are you doing?! Rei!"

Someone grabbed him by the shoulder, tearing him away from Shin and sending him tumbling to the floor. Rei came to his senses.

What was I...doing...just now...?

All he could see was the back of the priest's cassock as he leaned over Shin and checked his condition. He placed his hands over Shin's mouth, touched his neck, and began resuscitating him, his pace weak from terror.

"...Rever—"

"Get out."

That growl set Rei's eyes darting about in bafflement. *But Shin, he's not moving.* Turning one silver eye to Rei, who was standing still, stupefied, the priest bellowed at him.

"Do you want him to die?! Get out!"

That shout of true, unadulterated fury sent Rei scurrying as if the sheer force of the shout had flung him from the room. Rei sank to the floor.

"Ah..."

The Alba had lost the war and oppressed the Eighty-Six, who oppressed other, weaker Eighty-Six. Rei always loathed that never-ending chain of oppression. The vulgarity of using someone weaker than yourself as an

outlet for the pain and cruelty you endured... And he had done just that. He took his grief from the loss of his parents, his indignation toward the Republic, his frustration at the absurdity of this world, and most of all, his anger at and hatred of his own helplessness...and vented them all at someone much younger and weaker than himself: his younger brother.

The weight of that sin sent shivers through his body. He fell to his knees, grabbing his head.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!!"

I... How could I...? But I was... I was supposed to protect him...!

Thankfully, Shin had resumed breathing shortly after. He'd come to, but Rei couldn't bear to see him. The priest had cautiously forbid the two from interacting, and Rei was afraid to face him. He accepted the directive, as if to run away.

When he left, the priest saw him off with Shin, but Rei still couldn't say a word. The idea of turning to look at his brother only to find a frightened expression he'd never seen before terrified him. He couldn't afford to die. He had to live at all costs and return home. That thought spurred him to cling to life even as companions died one after another around him.

However...

The onslaught of powder snow chilled him to his very bones. Rei realized, through the haze of blood loss clouding his mind, that the end had come. His eyes caught sight of the emblem emblazoned onto his Juggernaut's crushed armor. A skeletal, headless knight. It was an illustration from a picture book. A fairy tale's protagonist.

Rei had always thought it was creepy, but for some reason, it was Shin's favorite. But now he wasn't even sure if he could remember the book or having read it to Shin every night... Neither that nor any of his other precious memories.

Rei grimaced in agony. He should have said something the day he departed. He should have told Shin and made it clear it wasn't his fault. That night, Rei had laid a curse on Shin and run away, leaving him carrying it. Those words, those accusations that his family's deaths were all his fault, would probably go on to torment Shin for years to come. The knowledge that he'd killed the family he loved would twist his heart to no end. His parents' deaths and Rei's violence had likely driven him to tears countless times. Was he even capable of smiling anymore?

"...Shin."

A gray shadow spread over his white field of vision. The Legion. They'd come after him. Out of the corner of his eye, he could make out that skeletal knight. The hero of justice who always came to the aid of the weak.

If only he could have stayed his brother's hero. He'd crushed that chance with his own two hands, and yet he wanted to see him again, to extend a hand to him...

That final moment would go on to define *his* form.

CHAPTER 7

GOOD-BYE

“...Shin.”

Countless silver hands, the color of liquid micromachines, sprouted out from under the Dinosauria's armor. The hands were the size of an adult's and had jointed fingers. The most striking difference was, however, that they were several times the length of a human arm and extended at a startling speed. Both the left and right hands sprang forth in search of something. As each and every one extended toward Undertaker, the Dinosauria howled madly.

[illegible]

That bellow rattled even those Resonated at the lowest synchronization rate down to their cores. Even Raiden, the most experienced in fighting at Undertaker's side, broke into a cold sweat at the sound of this bloodcurdling roar. Anju shrieked and covered her ears. Only Shin turned to face the Dinosauria, as if it had simply called his name.

“...Shin?!”

"You guys go on ahead. I'm leaving you in command, Raiden."

His cold gaze was fixed on the Dinosauria; he refused to look at anything else.

“If you go into the forest, they shouldn’t find you so long as you’re cautious of the Ameise. Just get past here and keep going.”

“What about you?!”

“I’ll come once I defeat it. We can’t move forward until we take it down, and I won’t move on until I do... Plus, I doubt it’d let me go.”

A chill ran through Raiden when he heard how Shin finished that sentence.

This idiot.

He just...

He just smiled.

Oh, dammit, this is bad. There's no getting him to turn back now. His heart was never here to begin with. He was always haunted by that lost head. Always searching for his dead brother's stolen head. All the way until now... Probably since the day his brother strangled him.

Raiden knew this, but he still growled a defiant response.

"Fuck you. Who the hell would just go along with that?"

As if he would ever accept an order to leave Shin to die.

“...”

“If you’re saying it has to be you against him, there’s nothing I can do... I’ll handle the rest of ’em, so clean up your mess as soon as you can.”

As he said this, Raiden suppressed the anger that welled inside him. *So he’s intent on doing this alone.* If he’d asked for help or requested support, Raiden would’ve gone along with anything.

Why is this idiot so...so stupid, now of all times?

After a brief moment of silence, Shin sighed.

“You’re an idiot, you know that?”

“Like you’re one to talk... Don’t die, you hear me?”

This time, Shin gave no reply. The shrill sound of a long-distance artillery cannon firing somewhere served as the signal opening this battle. Four armored units hopped into action, evading a barrage of bullets. Riding the quadruped spider, the skeletal knight leaped onward, like a beast lunging at its prey.

The Dinosauria rose to Shin’s challenge, the Ameise serving as its escort deploying around it. Every model of Legion except the Scout types had low sensory capabilities and received information via a data link with the Ameise, who sacrificed firepower for superior sensors. The units scattered around the Dinosauria served as its eyes.

A pair of Ameise standing at the front perceived the charging Juggernaut, transferring all manner of data and the footage from their optical sensors to the Dinosauria, which proceeded to swivel its main battery in Undertaker’s direction. The cannon roared. The Dinosauria’s turret—its 155 mm caliber cannon equal to an artillery gun—fired savagely, unleashing armor-piercing shells at a velocity that left even sound in its wake, impacting just ahead of Undertaker.

But Undertaker’s sights were set not on the Dinosauria—but on the Ameise serving it. Gunning down one and using the body of the next as cover while crushing it with a kick, he then finally fired upon the Heavy Tank type. The smoke grenade he launched burst in midair, momentarily blinding the Dinosauria’s meager optical sensors. Taking advantage of this chance, Undertaker crushed the second Ameise and leaped at the blind spot created by the two destroyed Scout types.

The Juggernauts’ primary weapon—a feeble 57 mm cannon that paled in comparison to the Legion’s firepower—couldn’t hope to penetrate any point of the Dinosauria’s thick armor, even at close range. There was only one vulnerable spot, and Undertaker had to destroy the Dinosauria’s eyes to even have a chance at it.

As the Dinosauria used pressurized air to blow away the smoke, its massive frame clambered about. Rotating its machine guns in the direction Undertaker was more likely to be found, it attempted to mow him down with superior firepower. Undertaker, who’d leaped back to evade the machine-gun fire, appeared on the other side of the smoke. A heat haze rising from the temperature of its cannons distorting its position, the Heavy Tank type

swiveled its battery again, its headless shadow shifting and distorting. Undertaker scuttled about in what appeared to be an erratic dance, anticipating where his foe's sights would be fixed in what bordered on precognition.

The Legion were clearly moving to separate Undertaker from his comrades and, likewise, isolate each of the four to annihilate them. The Löwe and Grauwolf types attacked each Juggernaut in waves, and even if the Processors attempted to take cover, the Ameise scattered throughout the battlefield would track them down in a matter of seconds. Stier fired on their path of retreat relentlessly, and Skorpion types bombarded them from afar, pinning them down and limiting their freedom of movement. The Processors had gunned down the Legion near them in quick succession, but for every unit they took down, two rolled out to replace it.

The Legion would usually never engage in such a packed battlefield. There was no doubt that a Shepherd was commanding them—in all likelihood, the Dinosauria. In a pause between yet another flurry of slashes and gunfire, Raiden looked in the Heavy Tank type's direction. Beyond the surging wave of Legion swarming toward them like ants was the lone empty stretch of battlefield where Undertaker and the Dinosauria faced off one-on-one.

It was an unbelievable sight, more of a joke than anything else. Squaring off against a Dinosauria was an insane prospect to begin with, and the fact that it even looked like they were exchanging blows bordered on miraculous. A Juggernaut was far inferior in terms of firepower, armor, and mobility. Normally, this wouldn't even be considered a fight, but since it was Shin at the helm, Undertaker was just barely able to put up a resistance... No, even Shin shouldn't have been able to pull off this much.

The Dinosauria defied all logic applicable to armored weapons and simply stood still confidently while Undertaker skittered around it as if dancing on a razor's edge. The Juggernaut performed precise and reckless maneuvers and avoided attacks so narrowly that Raiden could feel his stomach turning from the terror and suspense. It was by no means an equal fight. Could he balance on this tightrope of a situation for long? Or would they all be killed by the Legion first?

A small fissure in his resolve began forming. He'd lost count of how many Legion he'd gunned down by now, but shot after shot, they still kept coming. His accumulated exhaustion and the dread of fruitless effort weighed down on him. Even battle-hardened veterans like them were being gradually worn down.

"Reloading! Cover me!"

Theo shouted in between erratic breaths, his voice chipped by fatigue. Fido purged one of its six containers as it zipped bravely between lines of fire. That container's stocks of ammunition had been depleted, meaning they'd consumed almost 20 percent of the month's worth of ammunition they'd been given in just this short period of time. The moment they

completely ran out would be their last. That fleeting thought passed through Raiden's mind, and he forced a smile. *Bring it on.* Living and dying like this was all they wanted.

Suddenly, one more person, another Resonance target, connected to their conversation.

"First Lieutenant Shuga! I'm borrowing your left eye!"

A moment later, the vision in his left eye went dark, and then the light returned to it immediately. The same voice spoke again:

"Shell fired! It's going to touch down—brace yourselves!"

The next moment, the sky flashed white.

A soundless burst of light filled the battlefield, and a second later, a thundering blast deafened them briefly. The Eintagsfliege dispersed, opening a hole in the veil they'd formed over the sky, falling like stardust from the heavens as the blast's shock waves blew them away and its flames consumed them. It was a powerful bombardment by a fuel-air explosive. A gap parted in the argent cloud, revealing a pale-blue sky—which then turned black as a swarm of guided explosives descended upon the battlefield.

Accurately chasing down and impacting their predetermined targets, the fuses on the projectiles activated, hatching the metallic shells. Every single one of the hundreds of small pallets was set to track its target via radar, and they burst out from above, propelled with an initial velocity of 2,500 to 3,000 meters per second, pelting the enemy mercilessly with shrapnel. The steel rain ate into the Legion, whose armor was brittle, from above, downing half the second wave of Legion within half a minute. Then came a second bombardment. Yet another shower of steel decimated what remained of the second wave.



Raiden, Theo, Kurena, and Anju were completely speechless for a long moment. They had never seen it in operation, but they knew what it was. The interception cannon. It was always behind the front lines the Juggernauts defended, sitting there like an overgrown hedgehog. Not once had it ever fulfilled its role and fired, remaining in the background like a useless objet d'art. And the one who'd fired it...? No, the only one strange and foolish enough to escort them even as they trod the path to death was her.

"Major Milizé! Is that you?!"

Her voice rang like a silver bell in response. It was filled with resolve and unable to contain its anger.

"Yes, it's me. I'm sorry for being late, everyone."

†

"I told you I never wanted to see your face again, Lena."

Lena was anxious she wouldn't come to the door, but Annette opened it surprisingly quickly.

"Yes, I remember you saying that, Annette. But I don't recall ever agreeing to it."

It was raining that night. Lena stood on the border between the darkness of the night and the house's illumination, her face wrought with exhaustion and fatigue, as she hadn't had time to fix herself up properly before heading out. Standing there with her lustrous hair disheveled, her uniform worn and battered, and her face pale and without makeup, Lena looked very much like a corpse. Only her silver eyes still shone with a peculiar light.

"I need you to reset my Sensory Resonance targets again and adjust my RAID Device."

Annette moaned, her eyes like those of an injured, cornered animal.

"I won't, and you know it. I want nothing to do with you anymore."

"Oh, you'll do it. No matter what."

Lena smiled. Some part of her thought her expression must be terribly frightening, cruel, and ugly right now.

"That childhood friend you abandoned."

She smiled like a devil... Like a reaper.

"His name didn't happen to be Shin, did it?"

For a moment, Annette's expression entirely crumpled.

"...How...?!"

Seeing the girl turn paler than she'd ever seen her, Lena pondered how she'd guessed correctly. It was a gamble, and Lena had tricked her. But at the same time, she'd been convinced she was right. He'd lived in the First Sector, where the Eighty-Six were hardly present even before the war, and had been the same age—or a year younger—as Lena and Annette.

But what ultimately convinced her was that Shin could hear the ghosts while the boy Annette described had an ability to communicate with his family's hearts. It was fundamentally the same ability, except the ones with whom they'd connected were different. The resemblance was simply too great—it couldn't have been a coincidence.

"How do you know his name...?!It can't be—!"

"Yes, that's right. He's part of my squadron. The Spearhead squadron's captain, Personal Name: Undertaker. That's Shin."

She'd had a chance to save him and abandoned him a second time. Lena didn't even budge when Annette grabbed her by the collar and clung to her fearfully.

"Did Shin tell you that?! He's still alive?! That boy... Does he, does he still resent me for what I did?!"

"What are you asking me for? I thought you didn't want anything to do with me anymore."

Lena stepped back, brushing off her hands and turning a cold smile on Annette, who stepped into the dark, rainy night after her. She'd never heard Shin mention anything about Annette. In all likelihood...he didn't even remember her anymore. His memories of Rei and his parents had been lost to the flames of war and the ghosts' wails, so there was little chance Shin had remembered a childhood friend. Whether that was a curse or a blessing for Annette was a question she didn't have the answer for, though.

"But if you do think this concerns you, then help me. And decide quickly. If you take your time, the roosters will start to crow."

And by the time they do, you'll likely have said you don't care about me anymore another three times.

Standing stock-still, Annette smiled. It was a smile stained with tears, and her expression somehow looked relieved.

"...You're a demon."

"You and me both, *Technical Lieutenant Penrose*. You and me both."



That's right—Lena was neither brooding nor overwhelmed by guilt. She simply hadn't had time to Resonate with the Spearhead squadron. She needed her Sensory Resonance reconfigured to allow her to share the sense of sight, to get the firing codes for all the interception cannons in the surrounding wards, and to gather every method possible to cover the squadron.

"...! Fifty percent misfires...?!"

Lena groaned, looking at the firing results. Thirty percent of the interception cannons were inoperable, and 30 percent of the guided projectiles simply crashed, their fuses not having ignited. They weighed one hundred kilograms each, so the fallen projectiles ended up crushing a few

unfortunate Ameise, but that was a far cry from the firepower they should have delivered.

Faulty maintenance at its finest. Seeing how the Republic reduced its own armory to rust thanks to its own vanity was an absurd sight. She directed the remaining interception cannons to the same spot and fired again. Confirming the target enemy unit was destroyed, Lena exhaled in relief.

Shin had said they were finally going to be free, and Lena'd argued that wasn't freedom. Despite that, though, she couldn't have the Special Reconnaissance mission rescinded or save them in any way. So if nothing else, the least she could do was ensure the journey they craved lasted even a second longer, that nothing stood in their way. That was the only tribute she could pay them.

The freedom they'd finally earned.

It was only their first day knowing freedom. She couldn't let their journey end here. Not like this.

Raiden found himself shouting at that ringing voice while fighting the first force of Legion cut off from their supply chain. The third wave of Legion stood silent, judging whether it should advance after seeing the second wave decimated.

"You're a complete and total idiot, y'know that?! The hell were you thinking?!"

"I only shared your eye's optical information to confirm your location and fired the interception cannon manually based on that. Oh, I kept my own eye closed so as not to distract you, so don't worry."

Hearing her explain it so matter-of-factly just made Raiden rail at her even harder.

The hell do you mean, you "only" shared it?! You know it's more than just that!

"Don't you know Handlers avoid sharing sight because it can result in blindness, you moron?! And did you have permission to fire that damn thing?! You even being there is a breach of orders!"

Sharing eyesight confused both ends of the connection, as it made them see things that weren't near them, and on top of that, shared vision had too much informational content. Overusing it burdened the brain and could eventually result in loss of eyesight, so it was never used when commanding. She had fired an artillery weapon without approval to provide support for them on a mission during which she'd been explicitly forbidden from offering any kind of support. It was blatant violation of orders and certainly not worth it for a suicide unit!

But Lena suddenly snapped back at him. It was first time he'd ever heard the Handler girl shout at someone.

"So what?! If I lose my eyesight, it'll happen God knows when, and I don't care if firing the cannon on my own is violating orders! What'll they do, dock my pay? This won't kill me!"

Her shouting caught Raiden off guard, rendering him completely silent. Breathing heavily from the anger and indignation, Lena spat out words with a desperation he'd never heard from her before.

"Headquarters and the government won't listen to common sense anyway. I have no reason to play by their rules, and they're welcome to criticize me all they want... I should have just done this from the beginning. To hell with authorization."

Her voice was steeped with bitterness for a moment as she ended her tirade with a haughty snort. Shaking off his surprise, Raiden found himself smirking ironically.

"You're a real dumb ass, you know that?"

"I'm not doing this for you guys, I'll have you know. If a force of this size broke through, the Republic would be in danger. I'm only fighting because I don't want to die."

Delivering that line with a clear voice, Lena finally laughed. It was the first time, he felt, Lena had smiled that day.

"Once the third formation moves, I'll fire. I can't fire at the first formation and guarantee you won't be caught in the blast, so don't expect any support there. I'm sorry, but you'll have to handle those on your own."

"Yeah, no problem. That's business as usual for us."

"...What about Captain Nouzen?"

Raiden's eyes narrowed bitterly at that question. The Reaper was still Resonated with the rest of them, but since he hadn't responded, it meant he wasn't aware of them at all. All Raiden could feel over the Resonance was the cold, savage presence of his fighting spirit.

"He's fighting with his brother, to the death. That's Shin's whole purpose in this. He can't hear us anymore."

Shin spurred his Juggernaut on, struggling to find a chance to land a crippling blow as his brother's deafening screams rumbled in his ears. As he danced upon the line between life and death with a precision that couldn't afford any mistakes, Shin's consciousness was focused only on the opponent before him. He couldn't see anything but his enemy and couldn't hear anything but its voice and the sound of the shots it fired. Shin couldn't even feel the passage of time anymore.

The Dinosauria aimed its cannon and aligned its sights. Undertaker bent his rear legs, which had braced back for support, deliberately slipping, making the Juggernaut tilt out of the Dinosauria's line of fire. The Dinosauria's secondary armament was aimed to the right, where the cannon was, and if Undertaker kept dodging clockwise, he'd be fired upon, not just by the main cannon but also by the machine gun—

The Dinosauria fired its secondary gun. The projectile just barely missed Undertaker's right leg, and at that moment, the main gun aligned its sights. Undertaker, still skidding to the side, wasn't in a position to evade but narrowly avoided the shot that came his way, using a wire he'd fired into the ground a good distance away to tow himself out of danger. The shell hit a Löwe that happened to be behind him, blasting it to bits. The Dinosauria

braced itself, as even with its massive weight and powerful legs, the recoil of two consecutive shots required it to regain its bearings.

Undertaker took advantage of that moment to leap at the Dinosauria. His gun shifted its angle of elevation, setting its sights on a section at the upper portion of the rear of the Dinosauria's turret. It was, as far as Shin could see, the point where its armor was thinnest, the one spot on its heavily armored frame where a Juggernaut's feeble main armament could hope to penetrate.

Undertaker squeezed the trigger. He fired an anti-armor round at a high angle, a fatal attack from above.

But one of the hands sprouting from the Dinosauria's turret simply brushed the shell away.

"...?!"

Shin's eyes bulged at this nightmarish development. The hand was crushed by the blast, but as it was made of fluid, it restructured itself in a matter of seconds, its fingers wiggling disgustingly. He could feel the Dinosauria's consciousness fixed on him. Undertaker leaped back while the ground where he'd just stood was ripped apart by machine-gun fire. A second barrage of lead came his way, then a third. Undertaker evaded, but now the Dinosauria was out of his range. The Dinosauria confidently swerved in his direction, having pushed him back with nothing but its machine guns, its weakest armament.

Its suppressing fire alone had forced him on the run while simultaneously cutting off Shin's sole point of attack. A shiver ran through his body, but in contrast, his lips parted in a smile.

One of the Grauwolf types had perhaps seen this as a golden opportunity, as it broke file and charged at Undertaker. It was, however, blown away mercilessly by the Dinosauria, as if its cannon's roar was forbidding the Legion to interfere. The sight only made Shin's smile deepen.

His brother's final words were still calling out to him, telling him it was all his sin, ordering him to die and atone. Even after death, he insisted on killing Shin with his own two hands.

...Me too, Brother.

Rei didn't know whether right now he was Shourei Nouzen's soul or a copy of his memories sampled from his decomposing corpse on that snowy night. He didn't know, and whichever it was didn't make much of a difference. All he knew was that despite dying, he got a second chance. That was good; that was all that mattered.

He could tell Shin was somewhere on the battlefield. He could hear his voice. But it was so small that it was drowned out by the tumultuous noise coming from the Republic's pathetic, decaying carcass. Additionally, the Republic had shamelessly thrown Shin into the battlefield and had the gall to call him their property, which made it even harder to distinguish Shin's whereabouts.

Whenever they would go out into the Republic's wards, Rei would use the Ameise's eyes to look for him. Rei, who was now a Legion, couldn't go against his directives, and as a commander, he had to remain in the depths of the Legion territories. But even so, if Shin was nearby, he wanted to see him again. To meet him, to apologize, to be forgiven, and then...

After a while, he finally found him, through the eyes of a broken, crippled, but still barely functioning Ameise. There had been a meteor shower that night, seemingly rather far from Rei's location. Zooming in allowed him to finally catch a glimpse of his brother's face. He'd gotten bigger and older. He was apparently speaking to one of his comrades, an Eisen. Wanting to hear his voice, Rei shifted his focus to the Ameise's audio sensors. Had his voice changed by now? Maybe it hadn't. It didn't really matter, though. *Aaah, I want to hear him already...*

The two were watching the sky full of shooting stars. Their Juggernauts were squatting on the ground, and the Processors were reclining against the machines' armor, their silhouettes like those of little children.

"Is your brother still out there?"

"Yeah. He keeps calling for me. So I have to go find him."

Are they talking about me? So you were looking for me, too...

Even though he'd been reduced to a machine, a shiver ran through Rei's body. He was sad to learn Shin had come to the battlefield, but knowing he'd done it to find him filled Rei with joy.

"But you already buried your brother, man. Isn't that enough?"

Oh... So you buried my corpse. Shin, you're too kind...

"...That's not enough. My brother wouldn't forgive me after just that."

Rei froze with shock.

Why are you saying that? If you can't be forgiven, what hope do I have of being pardoned? I have to tell you that's not true; I want to explain, to meet you, to meet you, to meet you, so much it drives me mad.

A Republic transport then came and picked Shin up, and his brother's small voice was once again swallowed by the noise and disappeared out of reach. Rei would search for him everywhere, but each time he found him, the Republic would take him away again.

Rei was becoming desperate. He couldn't move away from his station at the depths of the territories, but he used all the Legion under his command. And Shin kept fighting. He kept charging the battlefield (where he would one day surely be abandoned to die), remaining composed as he survived battle after battle.

Aaah, but you don't have to do that anymore. There's no reason you should be fighting for those pigs, Shin. If that's the only place you can live, I may as well just bring you to my side. Leave that brittle human body behind already. We can transfer you to as many bodies as we'll need. And this time, I'll protect you. This time, I'll always keep you safe, forever.

Today, those filthy pigs had finally released Shin from their vile clutches. His voice wasn't faint and didn't mingle with the Republic's anymore. It was

clear now. Rei knew Shin was heading into the depths of his Sector, so he went out to greet him. Finally, he could go and reunite with his little brother.

And now, at last, he was face-to-face with him. The dear, precious brother he'd searched for tirelessly was sitting inside that clumsy spider. The Juggernaut was too brittle to even be considered armor, so Rei gently, cautiously reached out with his hands so as to not break it. But as the spider kept running around and he couldn't seem to catch it, he fired at its legs to stop it from moving.

I finally found you. Now I can take you back, and we'll always be together. Your big brother will always keep you safe, so please come to me...Shin.

The Dinosauria aimed only at his legs. It didn't target its main battery, either, firing only armor-piercing rounds at him. Were it to fire its 155 mm cannon, it would have no way of controlling the splinters the shell released at high speeds, and a Juggernaut wouldn't be able to withstand even the shock waves from the blast.

Was it toying with him? No—it probably just didn't like the idea of blowing him up. Those slimy hands slithered and wriggled. Just like his brother's that night.

As if it's trying to say it can do it again, as many times as it takes.

Shin examined his optical screen, searching for a position that would be more advantageous. As soon as Undertaker stepped back, Rei stepped forward, going after him. Shin retreated, making small but precise changes in direction as he did, while Rei charged after him, rotating his machine gun in the direction of Undertaker's torso. He aligned his sights, ready to fire, and then—

The Dinosauria had reached the spot Shin had designated. He had him now.

A moment before the muzzle began spouting fire, Shin discharged a wire anchor that skewered a large evergreen tree to the left, behind the Dinosauria's frame. Retracting the wire at maximum speed, Shin zipped away and rapidly ascended. Kicking his way up the trees to the left, Undertaker moved along the trunks and branches as he made his way up directly above the Dinosauria. The Heavy Tank class's cannon was made to combat armored units at the same level of elevation, and while it was capable of rotating 360 degrees horizontally, it was terribly limited when it came to vertical mobility. It couldn't aim directly up and, of course, couldn't aim directly beneath its feet, making it incapable of counterattacking when approached from those directions.

Purging the wire in midair, Undertaker used the inertia to turn his body around and adjust his landing position. Using the seams in the Dinosauria's armor as a foothold, he clung to the top of its fuselage. The Dinosauria's own gargantuan frame impeded it, and the machine-gun fire wouldn't reach its target this close. Shin drove his high-frequency blade into the point

where the armor was the thinnest. A shower of sparks erupted from the metal as it melted away like butter. Shin aimed his cannon at the exposed section, when suddenly two silver hands grew out of the wall and grabbed his grappling arm.

“Wha—?!”

It was just like that night in the church. He was swung up and knocked down. And then Shin lost consciousness.

Raiden’s eyes opened wide as he felt his Resonance with Shin suddenly cut off. They had nearly finished dealing with the Legion in the area. Fido had purged its second container, and Lena continued firing guided projectiles at stubborn Legion that had sneaked in from the rear to see what was going on. The Legion had finally begun retreating when it happened.

“...Shin?!”

He tried resetting the Resonance, but Shin didn’t respond. Raiden looked in the Dinosauria’s direction, seeing it slowly turn in toward Undertaker, who lay crumpled unnaturally, as if bashed against the ground. Sensory Resonance operated by linking people’s consciousness, so if one party was unconscious, a connection couldn’t be established. Which meant he was either asleep, unconscious—or dead.

The Dinosauria approached Undertaker calmly. It didn’t shoot him, but Raiden still had a terrible feeling of dread that told him they couldn’t allow it to get to Shin. Raiden switched to a wireless transmission. It still worked, which meant the cockpit was intact.

“Shin! Wake up, you moron!”

But Undertaker didn’t budge.

Rei had to be careful to not damage the Juggernaut’s innards but was able to rip off both its brittle grappling arms. The rest of Undertaker fell, rolling away somewhere. He wouldn’t be able go anywhere, though, so that was good. He was probably unconscious and possibly hurt, but Rei would apologize for that later, too. He drew closer to Shin, struggling to contain himself.

Finally, he thought, brimming with joy. Finally, I can take you back. We can be together now. So let’s start by peeling away that frail human shell of yours...

Lena bit her lip, watching in horror as the Dinosauria’s blip approached Undertaker’s. Raiden and the others were on their way to help, but their weapons wouldn’t be able to stop it. At this rate, Shin, and maybe even Raiden and the others, would...

Lena could taste blood. Apparently, she had bitten her lip hard enough to break the skin. Back then, Rei had said he wanted to return. Even though he hadn’t put it into words, she could tell how much he cherished his brother. But if that was true, why was Rei trying to kill Shin now? Lena knew she had to stop him, but she had no way of doing it. The guided projectiles and the interception cannon were both too powerful; she had no means of destroying the Dinosauria that wouldn’t kill Shin in the process. A

Juggernaut's armor was far too brittle, and if she shot down the Heavy Tank type, the fragments would definitely penetrate Shin.

Anything. Isn't there anything I can do?

Think, think, think—! And then Lena's eyes widened, a memory flashing in her mind.

"Ensign Kukumila, I need you to observe the Dinosauria's position as accurately as you can and send me the data."

Those words made Kurena leap up. She was a sniper and realized what Lena was planning without any further explanation.

"We're going to have to manually guide the missile to it. I leave it to you. You just need to expose it to your laser sight, so..."

"H-hold up! Isn't that...?!"

"You're not thinking of bombarding it, are you?! Have you lost your mind?! Shin's right there!"

"Even if it's only nearby, there's no way the Juggernaut will withstand the blast! At that distance, Shin will get caught up in it for sure!"

Theo cut into their exchange, flying into a rage. Anju also joined in, her voice tinged with panic.

"I have an idea. I think all it'll do is give us a chance, but...I don't want the captain to die, either."

Hearing that earnest, almost desperate entreaty, Kurena found herself agreeing to Lena's idea.

Raiden began firing at the Dinosauria as soon as it entered his range, and Theo and Anju followed suit. Their bullets were deflected by the Heavy Tank type's armor, and its advance continued unhindered. They kept firing at it, mowing down the few Ameise still prowling the area in the meantime. Every bullet they fired was repelled by the armor or cut down by their target's silver arms, and the Dinosauria's forward march continued unabated.

God dammit. Turns out the big brother was just as annoying as the little one, seeing everyone around them as nothing but insects in the background.

One of the Dinosauria's machine guns was hit by debris and silenced, and another bit of shrapnel impacted one of the Heavy Tank class's optical sensors, rupturing it. For the first time since the battle began, the Dinosauria turned to face the other Processors. The moment he noticed the second machine gun begin to rotate, preparing to mow down the annoying Juggernauts pestering it, Raiden moved his unit aside at the last second, just as the barrage tore into where he'd once stood.

As that happened, Anju and Theo approached the Dinosauria and fired their wire anchors in its direction. They coiled one around its gun barrel and another around one of its legs. The Processors then braced themselves, planting their feet into the ground. Two Juggernauts, each roughly a tenth of the Dinosauria's weight, couldn't hope to drag it down even if they worked together. Raiden switched his ammo to short-fuse explosive rounds, firing them at a high angle, and eventually silenced the other heavy

machine gun. Raiden then coiled his own wire anchor around the massive frame. The Dinosauria's progress finally began slowing.

Its rage and bloodthirst had become much more palpable and intense. Tearing away from the wires, the Dinosauria rotated its bound gun barrel at full force. Snow Witch, who'd failed to purge the wire in time, was thrown into the air and crashed into Laughing Fox, the two tumbling to the ground.

"Anju! Theo!"

"...I'm fine."

"Same here. I'm sorry, Theo!"

"Forget about that... Raiden! It's gonna shoot!"

In the moment he'd shifted his attention to his comrades, the Heavy Tank type's aim had locked in on Raiden. He didn't have time to dodge. Raiden gritted his teeth in suspense, but the Dinosauria's body suddenly jolted, and the shell it fired just barely skimmed Wehrwolf, who went flying off into the distance. Kurena had sniped it. The Dinosauria braced its front legs, stomping them into the earth as it angrily peppered the ground behind it at full auto.

"You all right, Raiden?!"

"Yeah, I owe you one! But back off now. If you get killed, I dunno if I'll be able to look Shin in the eyes... Major, much longer till you're ready?!"

Lena's voice was filled with tension.

"Shell fired! Remaining distance to target...three thousand! Ensign Kukumila!"

"Got it, taking over. Guiding commenced. Five seconds until impact... Three... Two..."

Gunslinger directed a laser sight, invisible to the naked eye, at the Dinosauria standing stock-still at Undertaker's side.

The Dinosauria's sensory capabilities were low. That applied even to a commander unit like Rei, who required a constant link with the Ameise to compensate for his relatively lacking visual sensors. But the Ameise deployed with him had all been annihilated, and he'd only issued simple directives to his other forces at the start of the battle. By now, they'd been routed and put on the retreat. Taking Shin back was Rei's first priority, and nothing else mattered, which was why by the time he noticed, it was far too late.

Just as his hands reached out to tear the canopy off Undertaker, a lock-on alarm blared up in his consciousness. The Dinosauria's optical sensors turned upward, only to be met with a massive shell falling its way. Its altitude-control wings spread out to maintain its swoop at a forty-five-degree angle—aiming directly at his upper armor. This shell—its appearance like that of a slug roughly the size of a human child—was a 155 mm anti-artillery guided projectile.

Rei was overcome by seething fury. This was, indeed, a shell with enough firepower to destroy even him. But at this range, Shin would get caught in the blast, too. Those bastards at the Republic weren't satisfied

just using his little brother and then getting rid of him; now they were using him as bait, too!

He didn't have the time to take Shin and run to safety, so Rei kicked up his front legs, launching his upper half like a bucking horse. He wrenched his body around, deployed as many liquid micromachine hands as possible, and blocked the shell with the sturdiest parts of his armor. Even with his upper armor damaged, his front armor should have been able to withstand the blast. He would block the explosion and the shock waves with his own body—he would protect Shin, who lay behind him, at all costs!

The shell drew closer. Only a moment remained until impact, and then...

Suddenly, he found himself looking at the night sky, laden with stardust that sparkled across the black heavens. A girl was looking down on him with her back to the sky, her hair and eyes a beautiful silver. He had met her once before. She was roughly Shin's age.

"Don't you want to protect him?"

Yeah. I do. I have to keep Shin safe. He's my precious brother.

Then the girl asked:

"Are you going to kill him again?"

_____ !

The Juggernaut lay still.

Little Shin lay still.

I...

Not again...

Impact.

Making contact with Rei, the shell's fuse — didn't activate.

It was a dud, an unexploded shell.

Guided projectiles carrying a shaped charge usually lacked the mass or propulsion to penetrate the Heavy Tank class's sturdy surface armor. The shell was crushed pathetically, and the fuse didn't trigger, leaving the explosives inert. However, the projectile had traveled at supersonic velocity, granting it a weight a normal shell would never have. The full force of that overwhelming kinetic energy mercilessly impacted Rei's body.

"Impact confirmed."

Lena kept her eyes fixed on the radar screen, watching as the guided projectile's indicator intersected the Dinosauria's blip. It didn't detonate. This was to be expected, since Lena knew the shell she'd fired had an inert fuse. Her father once told her, when she was younger, that even if a tank's armor could deflect enemy bullets, it did gradually take damage. A tank could deflect a shell fired its way, but the kinetic energy would still have an impact. Falling parts and equipment would rain down on the crew, and any bolts and rivets would tear off and ricochet inside the tank, injuring and potentially killing anyone inside.

Against the Dinosauria, it would only result in a powerful body blow. But this was the only method Lena could think of to attack it without getting Shin caught up in the crossfire. It would buy them a few seconds at most,

and until then, someone...anyone...would have to think of their next course of action.

But it was then that she noticed.

Someone else was connected to the Resonance.

Raiden noticed he'd finally succeeded in reconnecting with Shin.

"Shin!"

The connection felt weak, as if Shin hadn't fully regained consciousness. Raiden called to him again and again, but there was no response. But he couldn't give up, so he kept shouting.

"Wake up already, you dumb ass! Shin!"

"Captain Nouzen! Can you hear me, Captain?! Please wake up!"

Hearing everyone calling him from afar, Lena shouted as well.

Please wake up. Get out of there and destroy the Dinosauria. Not because of this. Not for any reason that has anything to do with this situation. I already know. I've noticed by now. So you have to go out and do it, with your own two hands.

Shin had said it that night with a sorrow that felt like it was stabbing at him—that he would gun his brother down. But Shin didn't really want to fight him. The reason Shin fought Rei despite that was...

"You want to let your brother pass on, don't you?! —Shin!"

Faintly, they could feel a red eye opening.

Rei's hind legs crushed the ground beneath them as he braced himself. His steel body creaked as his thoughts turned to white noise, the impact from the shell causing errors in his central processor. Even so, his instincts as a war machine spurred him to continue firing.

He could feel the annoying insects buzzing around him rush out of the way as his processor and sensors began to recover. And then Rei saw it.

Undertaker had risen to its feet without Rei noticing and now stood behind him—its muzzle leveled in the Dinosauria's direction.

Shin's left eye wouldn't open. He had apparently cut his forehead while he was unconscious, and now his eye wouldn't open because of the blood. His whole body felt numb and sluggish, and every attempt to move seemed a Herculean task. His mind was still hazy, and trying to think felt burdensome.

Shin held his head as he examined the dark cockpit through the mist clouding his thoughts. It seemed the sub-screen was busted. Propping himself against the inner walls to sit up, he glared at the main screen with control sticks in hand.

Someone's cries had brought him back to consciousness, but the effects of the blow he'd taken to the head were still tormenting him. He had no idea what was going on. He didn't understand how he was still alive or what had happened around him. There were only two things he knew. Shin and Undertaker were still alive. And the brother he'd sought for so long—the brother he needed to bury with his own two hands—was standing right before him.

His limbs were still numb, but he managed to grip the control sticks and place his finger over the trigger. That was all he needed.

“...Shin.”

He could hear the ghost’s whisper, the sound of his dead brother’s voice. He lurked here, in this deserted corner of the battlefield, never forgiving him. When he’d first heard Rei’s voice interlaced with the ghosts’ lamentations, Shin had resolved to find him and bury him with his own two hands.

“Shin.”

He grated his clenched teeth. The seven-year-old who should have died that day he was strangled was still weeping somewhere. His brother had said it was all his fault. That he should have died back then. That he might as well have killed him then. Shin would never forget it...

His brother would never forgive him.

But Shin wasn’t a child anymore. He wouldn’t allow himself to be murdered twice.

A long time had passed since that day, and Shin had managed to come to terms with many things. He thought about all that had happened, deeply, and understood. It wasn’t his fault he’d been strangled that day. Neither his brother’s death nor his parents’ deaths, nothing that had happened was his sin. Rei had needed an outlet for his pent-up emotions. His brother had simply snapped under the pressure, and Shin just happened to be around and weaker than him: a perfect outlet for his frustration. That was all it ever was. Shin didn’t carry any sins to repent for.

“Shin.”

Shin could hear the ghosts’ voices, but he wasn’t afraid of them. They were only pitiful and miserable. All they ever did was moan that they wanted to move on, shouting with the borrowed voices of the deceased or perhaps crying out in some mechanical tongue only they could understand. They’d lost their homeland and their bodies, and they kept screaming that they didn’t want to die, unable to return to death. An army of ghosts that could only weep that they didn’t want to die, despite their fervent desire to move on.

His brother was lost in that army, unable to move on. He had died and then been stolen away, trapped in one of the Legion’s murder machines. Shin had to reclaim his brother’s lost head. That was why Shin went to the battlefield, why he fought for five long years. Not to repay a debt, not to repent for any sin of his own, but to find his brother, defeat him, and bury him once and for all. And still, he had to atone for the sin his brother had bequeathed him in his final moments. He had to atone for his brother’s ghost.

Shin fixed his sights on the crack he’d etched in the steel monstrosity’s armor—

“...Farewell, Brother.”

—and pulled the trigger.

Rei watched everything unfold through his optical sensors. He could feel the trigger being pulled, the flames spewing from the muzzle. And at that moment, for some reason, he could feel the gaze of those red eyes fixed on him, filled with strength, will, and resolve.

He'd never known his brother's face like this, never known him to be capable of that expression. It was only natural. Rei had died five years earlier and had remained stagnant ever since, unable to move on. But Shin had lived. He'd changed, grown, and advanced. The little brother he'd sworn to protect at all costs was long gone. One day, Shin would grow older than his brother ever could. That made Rei happy and just a bit lonely.

Ah, that's right...

There was one thing I had to say in the end, wasn't there? Something I could never tell him until the very end. I tried to say it back then, that night in those snowy ruins, but died before I had the chance.

Just like that night, Rei reached out to his brother. A single hand extended from the crack in his armor.

Shin.

And then all he could see was light.

It all happened in the split second after he pulled the trigger. A liquid micromachine arm slipped through Undertaker's crumbling canopy, creeping into the cockpit. The hand moved with an odd slowness over the course of that long, delayed moment, seeking something out. It was his brother's large hand. Shin froze in terror, watching it trace the events of that night, but forced his stiffened body not to look away.

In less than a second, his brother would be immolated by the flames. The brother he had sought for five years. Shin had no intention of carrying the vestiges of his final thoughts any longer, be they hatred or wrath. But he had to commit them to memory. The fingers coiled around the scar on his neck, tracing it over his blue scarf. But just as Shin thought they would constrict and strangle him, the touch of those fingers that once tried to kill him became a kind and painfully sad caress.

"...I'm sorry."

And just as Shin's eyes widened in shock, time began flowing normally again.

The high-explosive anti-tank warhead impacted the Dinosauria, detonating. An explosion of high-heat, high-speed metal surged into the armored frame from the crack, engulfing it in flames of black and red. His brother's hand let Shin go, slithering back to its burning body.

"Brothe—"

Shin reached after the retreating hand, but his fingers caught nothing but air. He could only make out the sight of his brother's hand catching fire as it entered the inferno, while everything else clouded over.

"...Ah."

It took a moment for Shin to realize what the warm drops trailing down his cheeks were. Ever since the day Rei had killed him for the first time,

Shin couldn't cry. He was incapable of understanding that the feeling rising within him, crushing his heart, was sadness. The tears simply fell one after another, without end.

"Major, let's shut down the Resonance... This isn't something we should be hearing."

"Yeah..."

Lena connected again after a while, after Raiden contacted her and told her it was okay. The others had reconnected as well, and Raiden spoke on everyone's behalf.

"You all right, man?"

"Yeah."

There was still something of a shiver to Shin's voice, and while he wasn't crying anymore, his usual detachment seemed to have disappeared as well. Raiden laughed.

"Now you can take your brother's name along, too."

Shin smiled, too, however faintly.

"Yeah. I can."

He then turned his attention to Lena.

".....Major."

"I'm here. Of course I'd be here. I'm the Spearhead squadron's commanding officer, after all."

She had a duty to see everything through to the end. Even if no one wanted her to do it, it was still her duty.

"..."

"Situation resolved. Good job, Undertaker and everyone else."

Hearing her refer to him by his Personal Name made Shin's lips curl in a wry smile.

"Yes. Well done, Handler One."

"Well, then," Raiden whispered as he stretched inside his cockpit. Lena blinked in confusion. It felt as if the five had agreed on something, with her being the only one out of the loop. Lena tried to understand. *What is it?* They'd just decided something critically important, and she was the only one clueless.

"Fido, you done connecting the containers?"

There was a gap in the Resonance conversation, as if someone unconnected had just answered them. *Fido?* Oh, right, that was the name of the Scavenger attending them.

"We'll handle maintenance and repairs after we find somewhere to sleep... I gotta level with you guys. Burning through this much ammo on the first day kinda sucks."

"Look on the bright side. We probably wasted like a million Legion out there."

"I guess... Well, either way."

She could hear the distinctive noise of a motor as well as the sound of something heavy moving. Everyone's idle Juggernauts rose to their feet.

"Let's go, fellas. —So long, Major. You take care of yourself."

Raiden's parting remark was so casual Lena couldn't immediately understand what he meant. The battle had just ended, hadn't it? The enemy was on the retreat, and none of them had died. So now they just had to return to base like always, right?

"Um."

The young soldiers set out, leaving Lena to her confusion. The Juggernauts marched forward—their steps a bit unsteady due to battle damage—as their pilots chattered like students on the way to school.

"You sure we should be going through here, guys? There are duds lying around all over the place."

"Yeah... I'm a bit scared; this place is pretty much a minefield. Shin, can you find a detour that doesn't go through this ward?"

"There are no Legion in the area, so we can pretty much go in any direction... Wait, duds?"

"We'll explain later. Fucking hell, Shin, you really weren't paying attention to anything else, were you...?"

They marched on to the east, to the unknown battlefields controlled by the Legion.

Oh, right...

They can't go back anymore...

"Wai—"

A sense of fearful urgency burning through her body and a feeling of loss that chilled her very soul drove her to speak.

"Wait. Please, please wait...!"

She could feel them turning to face her. They stopped, waiting to hear what she would say next, but Lena didn't have the first idea as to what that would be. She was from the side that had driven them out, after all, the side that had ordered them to march to their deaths. She could apologize and condemn herself all she wanted, but those words wouldn't mean anything to them now. So what could she say? And yet, the words spilled from her lips.

"Don't leave me behind..."

Lena stiffened, unable to understand the meaning behind her own words. Did she just tell them not to leave her behind? *That*, of all things? She couldn't believe her own shamelessness. But they just laughed gently at her words. For the first time, she felt they'd truly smiled at her, like elder siblings watching their little sister throw a tantrum.

"Ah, feels pretty good, hearing that."

Raiden smirked, his smile filled with the strength and pride of a beast on the battlefield, one that relied on nothing but its own power and the help of its allies.

"That's right. We're not being chased out. We're moving forward, until we reach our final destination."

Everyone's focus shifted away from Lena and toward the horizon, their gazes and hearts fixed once again on that faraway place. Lena's breath stuck in her throat. The emotion she felt from them was neither resolve nor

serenity. If she had to describe it, it was what one felt when gazing at the clear, boundless expanse of the ocean for the first time. Like children seeing the endless fields of spring, having been told they could run as far as they pleased and play for as long as they wanted. It was endless excitement and pure, unblemished joy. Excitement and expectation that simply could not be contained.

Ah.

I can't stop them. There are no words I could say to form chains binding them to me.

Because for them, freedom meant being able to decide where you died and willingly choosing to travel down that path. They knew how precious a thing it was and how hard it was to achieve.

Lena fell silent. No words were left unsaid. Sensing she'd accepted their parting, the young soldiers resumed their journey. But noticing Lena biting her lip in frustration, unable to come to terms with reality, Shin turned toward her with one final smile. It was serene, one she was seeing now for the first time. Carefree, relieved, and bright.

"We're off, Major."

And then the Resonance quietly shut down. Five blips disappeared from her radar. They were out of her command range, and their Sensory Resonance target records had been erased.

And with that, I'll never meet them again...

Droplets streamed down her cheeks. One after another, the tears flowed without pause. Unable to hold back the pain that rose from the depths of her heart, Lena lay against the console and raised her voice in a sorrowful wail as she openly wept.

†

A large, faded drawing of the five-hued flag, with its colors arranged backward from left to right, was scribbled on the barracks' wooden wall. No, its colors weren't just reversed from right to left—the flag itself was also reversed vertically. Probably to stand for oppression, discrimination, intolerance, atrocity, and vulgarity. Beside it was a drawing of Saint Magnolia holding a chain and shackle—where a sword that severed tyranny should have been—smiling as she reduced others to pigs and trampled them.

That was how they saw the Republic. Lena's unblemished fingers traced the drawing that adorned the damaged, frayed wood. It was noticeably old, probably drawn by the Eighty-Six first assigned to this barracks, nine years ago. The Republic was dead. The Republic Lena and the other civilians took pride in and believed in had all but died a long time ago. It was torn to shreds and abandoned by its own citizens.

Lena closed her eyes and sighed softly. Her thoughts wandered to the boy that had left, wondering whether he could hear the voice of the

Republic, too. After everything ended, her commanding officers put her under house arrest until they could decide how to deal with her, to which she responded by boarding a transport that brought her to the base where the Spearhead squadron was stationed. It was the same transport that collected those destined for execution. Lena had to practically threaten the timid, kindhearted personnel officer to let her board.

"...You're Major Milizé, right?"

Lena turned around, her gaze falling on a maintenance-crew member who looked to be in his fifties. It was Lieutenant Lev Aldrecht, this base's head of maintenance.

"Heard about ya from the brats. Never thought you'd actually come all the way out here... You're as weird as they said ya were."

He spoke with a deep, slightly hoarse voice as he jerked his chin in the barracks' direction.

"The brats cleaned out their rooms before leavin', but there oughtta still be some of their stuff left behind. The new kids should come take their place in a bit, but feel free to have a look around before then, if ya want."

"Thank you very much. Pardon me intruding like this; you must be busy..."

"Heh, don't let it bother ya. We've seen more kids go to their deaths than we can count, but an Alba comin' to mourn 'em is definitely a first."

Lena suddenly looked up at his tanned, stern face.

"...Lieutenant Aldrecht. Are you...?"

His hair wasn't graying with age. It was silver hair, stained by black oil.

"...an Alba...?"

"..."

Aldrecht removed his sunglasses, revealing a pair of eyes the color of snow.

"My wife was a Colorata. My daughter looked a lot like her, too. I refused to let the two of 'em go alone, so I colored my hair and went after 'em. After that, I volunteered here to have their rights restored, but...heh, that didn't work. While I was working my butt off here...the two of 'em got sent to the battlefield and died."

He heaved a long, deep sigh and then scratched his head before parting his lips to speak again.

"...Did Shin tell ya about his ability?"

"He did."

"That ended up being a pretty famous story here on the eastern front... So I walked up to him when he got posted here. Asked if he heard any Legion lookin' for their shitty husband or dad."

"..."

"I figured if he said yes, I'd go out and have 'em kill me... But he said he didn't. There weren't any Legion callin' my name out there. Hearin' that... I think it kinda saved me. My girls weren't trapped on the battlefield even

after dyin'. So when I do go to the other side...they'll be waitin' for me there."

The old crewman smiled faintly. It was a sad yet somehow relieved smile. But when he turned his gaze to the east, where the battlefield spread out as far as the eye could see, the only word for his expression was *lonely*.

"I always tell the kids here I'm an Alba before they go on their Special Reconnaissance missions. I always say they have a right to hate us and can kill me if it'll make 'em feel any better... But no one ever takes me up on it. Same this time. Thanks to that, I got cheated outta dyin' again."

She almost felt like he was going to say he'd been left behind again. By his wife and daughter...and the countless children he'd met here while servicing their machines. Aldrecht put his sunglasses on again, as if trying to suppress something, whispering "What am I doin'...?" to himself.

"There isn't a whole lotta time left... If ya got somethin' to do there, do it quick."

"Yes... Thank you very much."

Lena bowed respectfully to Aldrecht and entered the barracks through the door at his side. The place looked like it had been thrown together with scrap wood, gray and brown being the dominant colors of the tasteless, unadorned interior. The corridor creaked as Lena walked through it, the surface of its walls and floor having turned white from years of dust clinging to them. The wood had a rugged, rough feeling to it. The kitchen and dining hall were both caked with oil and soot stains no amount of cleaning could ever hope to remove. It was anything but hygienic.

The showers were a damp, gloomy space that reminded Lena of the gas chambers she had seen in documentaries. A black, writhing mass Lena couldn't identify was squirming at the edge of the room. There wasn't a washing machine or vacuum cleaner to be found. A broom and dustpan standing at the edge of the hallway and a jagged board and wash bin in the barracks' backyard served as their unworthy replacements. This was no way for a civilized human being to live. That this was the sort of life a country so proud of its innovative and humanitarian practices would foist upon citizens filled Lena with shame.

The Processors' rooms were on the second floor. The staircase squeaked in protest as Lena ascended. The small rooms were filled with pipe beds and closets, their colors faded from years of dust, deterioration, and exposure to the sun. The rooms were all tidied up, robbed of any hint that people had once lived in them. The beds were made with newly laundered sheets and pillowcases, silently awaiting the arrival of their new occupants.

The room farthest down the hallway, as well as the largest, belonged to the captain. The uneven door opened with an audible creak. In addition to a pipe bed and closet, this billet was also equipped with a desk and a small open space where a number of objects were placed.

A guitar. A deck of cards and a set of board games. A collection of handicraft tools. A crossword puzzle magazine missing several pages,

leaving only the unsolved problems. A sketchbook, completely blank without a single drawing remaining. A basket full of lace and knitting needles, with no sign of the item they'd been used to create. A plank was nailed to the wall to form a makeshift shelf, stacked with books. There were various genres and authors, lending no insight into who might have owned them.

These had probably been set aside here so they wouldn't be thrown away, preserving them for use by the next squad members. But they'd gotten rid of all the things they'd made ahead of time, knowing they would be disposed of anyway.

Lena thought she could hear those young soldiers laughing, having chosen to live their lives to the fullest without leaving behind a single memento. Never submitting to despair, never letting hatred sully their pride. They stood tall and strong even in the face of cruelty that threatened to stamp out their dignity, and their lives stood as shining examples of what it meant to be human.

Lena walked up to the bookshelf, only to stop halfway. A black kitten, with splashes of white that didn't go past its paws, stood stock-still, as if helplessly wondering where everyone had gone. Outside the window, she could hear the sound of soldiers who'd apparently just had their pictures retaken. Lena reached out for the books. She didn't expect to make any discoveries but at least wanted to see what they'd been reading. She pulled out a book by an author she recognized and began flipping through it, when something slipped out of the pages.

"Ah."

She leaned over to pick up what turned out to be several sheets of paper. The first was a picture: a group photo of several figures standing in front of a building. She recognized that reversed flag; it was this barracks. The maintenance crew stood there, dressed in overalls, next to twenty-four boys and girls in their mid to late teens.

".....!"

Lena understood even without any explanation. These were the members of her Spearhead squadron. These were Shin, Raiden, Theo, Kurena, and Anju, and everyone who'd passed away, probably taken the day they'd been assigned here. The format of the image was the same as those taken for the Processors' personnel files, and the photo included everyone, even the maintenance crew. It was too small to make out any faces among the many figures standing there. For some reason, an old-model Scavenger was standing alongside them, too. Fido, in all likelihood.

It was the first time she'd seen her squad members, but the poor quality made it hard to discern their features. They weren't standing in a row, either, but rather, each took whichever position and pose came naturally as they looked at the camera. But Lena could tell they were smiling calmly.

The next sheet was a page from a memo pad, with a message written hastily in gruff, masculine handwriting.

If you actually went to the trouble of finding this, you're one crazy dumb ass.

And this time, her breath really did catch in her throat.

It was Raiden. And even though it didn't say to whom the note was addressed, Lena knew he'd written it for her.

The feeling is mutual, Raiden. You actually went to the trouble of writing this and putting it here on the off chance I'd find it.

The next note had a list of names arranged unevenly. It didn't take much thought to discern she was meant to match it to the group photo.

I wrote down everyone's names for you. I bet you're crying your eyes out right about now because you can't tell which of us is which.

Theo.

Take care of the cat. Might as well, if you're gonna insist on being a saint.

Kurena.

We still haven't decided on a name yet. Give it a cute one, okay, Major?

Anju.

Her hands trembled as she held on to the paper. Feelings welled up in her chest, threatening to burst.

They all left this behind for me. Even though I could never fight by their side. Even though I couldn't save any of them. Even though all I could ever do was spout powerless, idealistic nonsense while walking all over their lives, they still left this for me...

The final sheet of paper was Shin's. It was a single, characteristically curt line, written in his tidy, typically handsome handwriting.

If, one day, you make it to our final destination, would you please leave flowers?

The intent of the letter was clear and, at the same time, carried another meaning. The freedom Shin and the others sought was the freedom to press on for as long as they could, until death finally claimed them. And Lena would never reach their final destination unless she followed in their footsteps. She, too, would have to set out to become someone who never gave in to despair, who did not besmirch the dignity of man. Someone who fought and kept on fighting until her life burned out.

At the very end, he believed in her.

A single, warm tear trailed down her cheek. Lena smiled in spite of the sadness and loneliness flooding her heart.

Shin had said the Republic would inevitably fall. That its own hubris would herald its demise.

That may indeed be this country's inescapable fate. It may even come tomorrow. And for that very reason, fight until the final moment. Never give up. Never forfeit the will to live. Remain standing until the final moment. Honor the values those brave soldiers stood to represent.

Fight on. Until fate itself grows weary. Fight on, until the very end.

No country would ever consider it an act of evil to deny a pig human rights. Therefore, if you were to define someone speaking a different tongue, someone of a different color, someone of a different heritage as a pig in human form, any oppression, persecution, or atrocity you might inflict upon them would never be regarded as cruel or inhumane. It was when we believed this to be true, when we allowed this to come to pass, that the Republic of San Magnolia's demise began—and the moment it ceased to be.

—VLADILENA MILIZÉ, *MEMOIRS*

EPILOGUE
THE BLOODSTAINED QUEEN'S
SOJOURN

Five Republic mobile weapons lay in ruins, slumbering for all eternity within their casket of fortified glass.

It was in a blooming spring field, off a traffic route belonging to the Federal Republic of Giad. The sky was a gorgeous, crystalline blue, giving the landscape a sort of illusory, dreamlike appearance. It was where the border between the Republic of San Magnolia and the Empire of Giad once existed.

Having been allowed to enter the large, fortified glass case, which had been set up for preservation purposes, an eighteen-year-old Vladilena Milizé looked up at the wreckage of a Juggernaut. Its visage evoked the image of a headless skeleton. Her silver hair flowed, a section of it dyed red, sliding off her now-black Republic military uniform.

The remains of a Scavenger also lay there, with letters sprayed onto its flank. *Fido, Our Loyal...* The rest of the sentence was lost forever—a hole, caused by bombardment, in its place. But Lena had an idea what the rest of the message said. By now, she knew why Shin and the others had named a Scavenger but couldn't name a kitten.

They were warriors fated to fight to their deaths. To them, only those who would fight and die alongside them could be considered comrades. Only their brothers-in-arms, who would struggle next to them until the bitter end and fall on the same battlefield—only those who fought the same war—could be called comrades.

The five containers Fido should have been carrying were all missing. It had probably purged them all after depleting the supplies. Fido's own supply container was empty as well. It had matched the distance, considering they were marching through territory that was, at the time, completely under Legion control.

For one long month, they had marched through Legion-infested territory where they shouldn't have survived for more than a few days. They had probably kept going until their supplies ran out. They had made it out of the Republic's contested zones and entered the regions under the Legion's control. This place was now under the control of the Federacy, on the cusp of its contested zones. It was probably here that they'd exhausted their supplies...and here that they'd likely died.

This was their final destination. The plates Shin had etched the names of the 576 dead Processors onto had been temporarily removed from the Juggernauts' cockpit when the glass case was set up and returned after accurate replicas were made and their names recorded.

It had taken the Republic two years to reach Shin's final destination. The Republic had been destroyed, just as Shin had predicted, by its own sloth and arrogance.

After the Spearhead squadron's Special Reconnaissance mission, Lena was appointed as Handler to another squadron. She merely commanded them and knew she never truly stood by their side on the battlefield. The only things one could do on the battlefield were fight and die. Nothing else. Once one died, everything ended, and she had no intention of making herself out to be a tragic heroine when she'd never fought alongside Shin and the others. She included the Black Sheep, the Shepherds, and the Long-Range Artillery type in her report, but those were all treated as Eighty-Six nonsense and brushed off as unconfirmed hearsay.

Her new position was also a highly contested Sector of frequent sorties. It was on this deadly battlefield that Lena had resolved not simply to send her Processors to their deaths but to use them up and win at all costs. This earned her an alias.

The Bloodstained Queen, Bloody Reina.

It was a play on her first name, and while it sounded like the name of a villainess from some third-rate movie, Lena was quite fond of it. She saw it as a fitting moniker for someone like her, who could only trample the lives of others as she sent them into battle—a cruel, haughty person incapable of saving anyone. In spite of this, the rate of casualties in her squadron was significantly lower compared to other units. Even a year later, Lena's squadron continued participating in combat without having been restructured even once and came to be known as the Queen's Knights.

It was at that point that Lena frequently visited citizens who'd opposed the Eighty-Six's internment in the past, those who had tried to shelter their friends and families, as well as former Handlers who'd resigned out of guilt. She would speak to them and record the names, words, and characteristics of the Eighty-Six they'd known. Even if the government could erase formal records, it couldn't take away people's memories. She recorded them so that, when the time came and the Republic fell, someone would remember those lost souls.

And then catastrophe struck, all too quickly and all too suddenly.

It happened the day of the festival commemorating the Republic's founding. That year's high school valedictorian had said those shocking words during his speech. He was a young man, the same age as Lena, his eyes burning with conviction.

"Many among my classmates died fighting the Legion."

Pitying murmurs began filling the hall. Some people began sobbing in the crowd. As he looked down on them with cold disdain in his eyes, the young man's words turned into angry shouts.

"This country belittled them, called them Eighty-Six. They may have died on the battlefield, but it was the Republic that killed them! How long will this continue?!"

Not a single voice rose to agree with him.

Some fools mocked him, asking whether he couldn't tell pigs apart from humans. Others bit their lips, harboring the same indignation but unable to speak up. Others simply ignored him and moved on with their lives—and they all died, equally.

That night, a large force of Legion, of a scale never before seen, marched on the northern front, where the fighting had been the calmest.

The squadrons assigned to defend the Sector were easily decimated. The fact that it took their Handlers so long to learn of their squadrons' defeat was a sort of just revenge, however insufficient it might have been. During the fighting, the Handlers were all drinking in celebration, and none were Resonated with their troops.

Had any of them done their job more diligently, they would not have had to hear the news after it was far too late. Most of the interception cannons were inoperable, and the minefields were all blown away by the Long-Range Artillery type's bombardments. Any guided projectiles the Republic launched were shot down by the Stachelschwein before they had a chance to detonate.

The Republic's last hope, the Gran Mule, was powerless to stop their advance. Its walls were blasted down by a Rail Gun type, capable of firing spherical ammunition at supersonic speeds of eight thousand meters per second. A new type of Legion the Spearhead squadron had once reported encountering... A report that had been discarded. The immobile fortress walls swiftly crumbled before the nightmarish force of their destructive supersonic projectiles.

By the time the government realized the severity of the situation, the Legion had already invaded the Eighty-Fifth Sector. None of the civilians, who had pushed the duty of defending their safety onto the Eighty-Six, had any means of resisting the invasion.

And just one week after the fall of the Gran Mule, the Republic was destroyed.

The Republic's fall could not be seen as punishment. Very few died regretting their own cruelty and carelessness. They all blamed the ineptitude of others and perished believing themselves tragic victims. For those who met their fate unaware of their own sins, even death was not punishment.

Lena was in the First Sector when the invasion of the north happened, and she was able to escape the massacre, thanks to her preparations. She used every interception cannon in the vicinity of the minefield to blast open

the Gran Mule's gate. She then employed a hidden feature Annette had embedded in the Para-RAID to Resonate with all the Processors, requesting their aid in reclaiming the Eighty-Fifth Sector.

Many squadrons answered her call to arms, the Queen's Knights and other squadrons where former members of the Knights now served. But it wasn't out of good will or trust. The Processors probably decided that siding with the Republic—with its electricity and production plants—would increase their chances of survival. Many other Eighty-Six formed their own defensive positions, holding their ground to defend the internment camps where many of their friends and loved ones were.

Lena took command of these forces and formed a defensive line.

Some Alba took to the battlefield, piloting spare Juggernauts, but the majority cowered in fear, doing nothing. Some regarded the Eighty-Six with scorn and loathing, but unlike before, the oppressed were the ones holding the weapons this time. The battle-hardened Eighty-Six endured the Alba's foolish treatment, realizing internal strife was the worst scenario in the middle of a war. But had things lasted any longer, there's no telling what would have happened.

Two months after they formed their defensive line, a rescue force arrived from a neighboring country. They had come from beyond the eastern border, crossing into the Legion's territories. The Legion's forces were concentrated in the north, and the neighboring country's army broke through the mostly vacant eastern front to come to their aid.

They were the forces of the Federal Republic of Giad, who had overthrown the Empire and reformed themselves into a country for the people. The Empire was abolished by a revolution shortly after the war began. What the Republic intercepted, at the time, was a transmission from the militants' final defensive fortification. Having destroyed the Empire, the Federacy was also acknowledged by the Legion as an enemy and had spent the past decade fighting back against them. Many citizens willingly joined the war effort, believing the Federacy's ideals that it was the duty of the people to protect their brethren, and slowly yet surely, they liberated their lands from the Legion's control.

Armed with state-of-the-art weaponry, the Federacy's powerful army marched with their heads held high as they helped the Republic's remnants reclaim their lost territories, eventually making their way to the First Sector, where they were locked in a stalemate. The Republic's civilians greeted them with grateful applause, but unfortunately, things didn't end there.

The Federacy somehow knew the Republic had subjected their fellow Colorata, the Eighty-Six, to persecution and countless atrocities. Having freed the Eighty-Six from internment camps and frontline bases as they marched, bolstering their ranks along the way, the Federacy's army saw the terrible cruelty to which the Eighty-Six had been subjected with their own eyes.

The commander of the rescue forces would go on to tell the Republic's president and high officers, "If you hated colors that much, you may as well have dyed your flag white." It was a cutting statement, spoken without sarcasm. The Federacy favored the Eighty-Six, granting unconditional citizenship to whoever wished for it. On the other hand, they granted the Alba what minimal amount of support they needed but prioritized looking into how deep the persecution went.

Things weren't quite as bad when they discovered countless personnel files relating to the casualties in the Republic military's headquarters' underground warehouse. It seemed someone in the personnel division had preserved them in secret. There was some criticism when they saw that the majority of the dead were child soldiers, but the fact that some people in the Republic were still decent and repentant curbed their anger.

But the Federacy's gaze turned colder once they discovered journals written by inmates in the internment camps, detailing the atrocities to which they'd been subjected. The survivors also gradually began talking, and a great number of skeletons were discovered, buried in the ruins of internment camps and the fortress walls. When they eventually found records of human experimentation and the trafficking of infants, alongside footage of horrors performed by Republic soldiers, they no longer looked at the Alba as anything but human trash.

It wouldn't have been surprising if the Federacy had retracted its support then and there, but still they provided the Republic's remnants with minimal assistance. That was probably the Federacy's way of punishing them. The Republic might be the greatest scum in existence, but the Federacy refused to lower itself to the same level. Let those who know shame suffer from it until their dying day. And any pigs incapable of feeling shame don't even warrant attention or acknowledgment. Such was the Federacy's solemn condemnation.

It was around the time the First Sector's northern region was liberated from the Legion that the Federacy requested, in exchange for reinforcements, that an officer from the old Republic's military be dispatched to their army to serve as the commanding officer of rescue forces or, otherwise, as their aide. While many officers recoiled from the post, Lena willingly volunteered—which brought her to this place and time. Lena left the glass case behind her, picking up her suitcase and small carrier containing a black cat with white paws, which she had left outside just before entering. She turned her gaze to a large stone slate standing in this spring garden, commemorating these five Juggernauts and the 576 fallen soldiers who lay with them. It was the tombstone they were granted after fighting, surviving for as long as they did, and eventually finding their way here.

She didn't know she would find them here and so didn't think to bring any flowers. She would have to prepare some for next time. She still hadn't

truly made it to the same place they had. She didn't have the right to offer them flowers yet.

She turned to face the Federacy officers waiting for her, bowing lightly.

"Pardon me, Your Excellency. I've kept you waiting."

"Not at all. One can never spend too much time grieving those they hold precious, my dear."

The middle-aged Jet officer smiled gently, looking more like some detached, erudite philosopher than a military official. His beard was a graying shade of black, and he wore a mass-produced business suit and had a pair of silver-rimmed glasses. He regarded Lena, who was dressed in black and had a section of her hair dyed red, with a gentle, polite smile.

"You were mourning those lost lives and the deaths of your subordinates, were you not, Bloody Reina...? Frankly, there are quite a few in the Federacy calling to cut all aid to the Republic, saying we should only support our brethren. But with people like you around, I can say with certainty that we were right to save you. The Federal Republic of Giad welcomes you, Colonel Milizé."

She smiled back timidly, shaking her head. Many lives might have been lost, but this tombstone was for the subordinates she had allowed to die. This bloodstained queen was undeserving of praise. The old official smiled at her fastidious expression and turned. Several figures had stood up a short distance behind him, a group of young officers dressed in the Federacy military's steel-blue uniform.

"Come, this way. I'll introduce you to the officers who will be serving under you in your new squadron."

"Yes, sir."

She set forth, stopping only to look up at the tombstone one more time. The remains of those quadruped mechanical spiders and their attendant nestled together, slumbering for eternity. This was the place those boys and girls fought to find at the end of their harsh, cruel lives.

The war wasn't over yet. The Legion's forces still controlled the majority of the continent, and even now, someone was out there, fighting.

Until the moment the final Legion fell silent. So they could all reach this final destination, following in *their* footsteps.

Lena steeled herself in determination and stepped forward, making her way to those five officers. They were the same age as she was, and they saluted her in single file, welcoming her. She strode to their side, to her new battlefield.

So she could fight to the end. So she could live until the very end.

EPILOGUE II

REBOOT

He and the four other officers stood at ease in perfect file, watching as the Republic military officer left the glass case and greeted the Federacy president. They were all youths, still in their teens, but wore their new steel-blue uniforms with a familiarity and maturity beyond their years. Looking at the slender Alba girl's black uniform and silver hair, partially dyed red, his vice captain whispered suspiciously:

"Hey... You sure that's her? She's kinda...different from what I imagined."

"That just means she's been through a lot. Just like us."

His comrade simply murmured "No kidding" with a smile, directing a curious look at her. It had been a while since he first put on the Federacy's uniform, but he still wasn't quite used to it. Seeing himself and the others wearing them felt unnatural. Not breaking their orderly line, the other three began whispering as well.

"What's she called now, *Bloody Reina*? That's creepy as hell. Doesn't suit her at all."

"Hey, do you think she'll recognize us right away?"

"Hmm... Guess it'd be nice if she did, but it'll be pretty funny if she doesn't."

While they were talking, the girl seemed to have finished her business with the president, who motioned for her to face them. The three immediately held their tongues, their faces taking on neutral, nonchalant expressions, probably the result of their training in the Federacy military. Or perhaps even that was part of the prank they planned to pull on her.

They clicked their heels and saluted, greeting the president and the girl who would become their commanding officer a second time. The girl saluted them back in a manner somewhat different from what was customary in the Federacy and opened her mouth to speak, her gaze slightly stiff and severe.

"Colonel Vladilena Milizé of the Republic Armed Forces. A pleasure to meet you."

Ooooh, she doesn't recognize us.

The group exchanged amused looks, like kids whose prank had succeeded. He then opened his mouth to speak as captain on their behalf.

"This isn't the first time we've met. Although, I suppose it is the first time we're meeting face-to-face."

He smiled, watching her eyes widen in shock and awe.

"It's been a while, *Handler One*."



AFTERWORD

Aren't garter belts just the best?

Hello, everyone, this is Asato Asato. A weird name, I know, but have no fear; it's just a pen name. It's a twist on my real name and *eighty-eight*.

To those of you who sneaked a peek here before reading, I'm sure you'll enjoy this book.

To those of you who sneaked a peek with no intention of reading this book, I hope you find enjoyment in whatever piece of entertainment you do pick up.

And to those of you reading this after finishing the book... Thank you very much. How did you like it? It's a story that has a little bit of everything. You have battles and mechs and a boy-meets-girl story and a dystopia and so much more. If any of this happened to pull on your heartstrings, I'd be the happiest person alive.

As for me, I had a lot of fun writing this. This is the kind of story I love to read, after all! It's full of all the stuff I like! This is the kind of story I always wanted to write! Which makes it all the stranger that it ended up winning a prize. Even I'm not sure how *that* happened.

Well, to be honest, there were quite a few things I had to painstakingly omit from the final version so I could submit it to the contest. I ended up adding one of them, the scene portraying garter belts, during a later revision of the book. Garter belts are cute, aren't they? Sexy, too. Sexy and cute.

I hope you fellow garter-belt lovers enjoy Shirabii's super-cute and lovely illustrations of Lena and the garter belts adorning her sexy thighs.

And for those of you who haven't awoken to the appeal of garter belts, please leave me to my creepy ramblings. Here are a few addenda regarding the story:

- The story uses elements from World War II, specifically a certain country from the Axis powers and a certain country belonging to the Allies, and certain dark aspects of the history of that time. I would like to clarify that I bear no ill will toward any of those countries today; there just happened to be a lot of material regarding those particular themes.

- The story uses the word *pig* as a spiteful derogatory term. I would like to clarify, however, that I bear no ill will toward pigs. If anything, I love them! They're delicious. Pork cutlets are great, too!

- Please don't think too deeply on the particularities of the Sensory Resonance theory or any other weapons that appear in this work. They may be modified later on if need be. The collective unconscious idea in particular is one I intentionally misinterpreted for the sake of the story.

- The story takes place in an alternate reality but still employs the metric system. I did this because made-up units of measurement fail to really give one a grasp of what's going on. The reason I didn't use the old Japanese system or imperial units is because I don't really know them.

- This story takes place in an alternate reality but has references to the Bible, Remarque's novels, and so forth. The reason for that is... Well, I'll leave that to your imaginations.

...Let's stop pointing out my plot holes and move on to some words of gratitude, then.

To my editors, Kiyose and Tsuchiya. Your notes and well-thought-out feedback greatly increased the quality of this story. I always enjoyed meeting up to work with you.

To Shirabii. Your illustrations are always gorgeous. Your ability to imbue a character with a strong presence and dignified look in their eyes never fails to impress. Thank you so much for all your amazing work. When I got your sketch of Shin with all sorts of cool armor bits on him, I worked my brain off trying to find a way to fit something that awesome into my story.

To I-IV. Even though I told you to design something as absurd as a "weak, badly designed machine," you provided me with not just designs for cool, ominous-looking weapons, but also awesome designs for the Juggernauts. Seeing all the little details you put into their designs really made me excited. And to top it all off, the Legion are even more dangerous and borderline invincible than I thought they could be, with Fido going to the other extreme and being so adorable. Seriously, can I have one of those?

And finally, to all of you who read this work. Thank you so, so much. We may be at the end of this volume, but there are still plenty more stories coming your way, so please look forward to them.

In any case, I hope that for even a short moment, I was able to let you experience that closed paradise full of ostentation and vanity, and the skies, the stars, the winds, and the flowers of that battlefield rife with bloodshed and steel.

Music playing while writing this afterword: "Sidonia" by Angela

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